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## *Create Wolf Plan Based on Sound Science*

By FRANZ CAMENZIND and MELANIE STEIN

Recently, wolves in the Northern Rockies were extended a critical lifeline. U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula granted a preliminary injunction placing Northern Rockies wolves back under federal protection. Wolves in the region will have federal protection until a court case challenging delisting is decided.

The public had been waiting for nearly two months for the judge's decision, which clearly and thoughtfully highlights several critical problems with wolf delisting. Specifically, the judge singled out Wyoming's dual classification that allows unregulated wolf killing in nearly 90 percent of the state, leaving only a tiny area where wolves are managed by Wyoming Game and Fish. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service firmly rejected Wyoming's aggressive wolf management plan in 2003, claiming that the wolf should receive trophy game status throughout the state. But the Service "flip-flopped without explanation" by approving the plan with "the same deficiencies" in 2007.

The judge also found that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had flip-flopped on a key element in its original 1994 recovery plan for gray wolves in the region. This 1994 plan required that wolves in each of the three recovery areas (the Greater Yellowstone Area, northwest Montana and central Idaho) be connected as one "metapopulation." In other words, wolves in the region need to move around and breed with each other, leading to a regional wolf population that is healthy and sustainable into the future. Yet, the Service called for delisting despite its own research that proved otherwise: at population levels nearly three times higher than the recovery number of 30 breeding pairs, these wolf subgroups were still not connected.

Finally, the judge also noted that all three states had plans to allow sport hunting this fall. Those hunts would have contributed to the killing of more than 500 wolves this year alone. Reinstating federal protection for wolves in the region will stop this year's hunting season, but it won't stop the states from continuing to play a significant role in the management of wolves. States can still help livestock owners with conflict prevention and kill wolves that prey on livestock.

Right now, Wyoming has an opportunity to develop a reasonable, science-based management plan that will allow wolves to be sustainable into the future. This means eliminating dual classification of wolves in Wyoming. The beneficiaries of this go far beyond the wolf itself. Ranchers in the current predator zone would benefit by receiving compensation for livestock losses due to wolf depredation. In the future, when wolves are capable of withstanding a hunt, Wyoming Game and Fish would benefit from the sale of hunting permits in what is currently the predator zone.

Ultimately, we want to see wolves managed by the states, in a responsible and sustainable manner. But until the states come together and create reasonable management plans that benefit people living in wolf country and allow wolves to form a true metapopulation, rather than three isolated sub-populations, we won't get there. We won't get there until we bring together ranchers, hunters, conservationists, scientists and the public to create management plans based on sound science.

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