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California Wolf Plan Sets Road Map for Conserving Small Population

Two Breeding Pairs for Two Straight Years Could Trigger Reduced Protections

SAN FRANCISCO— The California Department of Fish and Wildlife has released its final [plan](#) to guide conservation and management of a small population of gray wolves well into the future. One of the strengths of the plan, which was released late Tuesday, is its emphasis on nonlethal methods to deter conflicts with livestock. But it would also seek to reduce wolves' federal protection status from "endangered" to "threatened" when the population reaches a threshold of only two breeding pairs for two consecutive years — far fewer than what independent scientists say is needed for a secure population.

In response to public comments on the proposed wolf plan, the agency stepped back from plans to initiate delisting of wolves once their population reached only 50 to 75 wolves. The agency also included in the final plan additional, current, best available scientific literature on key issues such as the vital ecological role of wolves.

But conservation groups say the final plan should have included specific protections to shield wolves from clearly identifiable threats such as being mistaken for coyotes during coyote-killing contests. And the plan failed to identify key wolf habitat conservation priorities like connectivity corridors crucial to building healthy, sustainable populations — a feature that would benefit not only wolves but other California wildlife as well. The plan also proposes to initiate aggressive management actions, which could include killing wolves, for ungulate population declines "presumed to be influenced by wolf predation" without a scientific assessment to determine if wolves, in fact, are the cause.

Environmental Protection Information Center

EPIC is a tax-exempt, nonprofit, 501(c)(3) organization listed with the IRS under EIN #94-2798433.

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“Because California is only in the early stages of wolf recovery, we need to give these animals a chance to become established in sustainable numbers rather than prematurely rushing to end protections that are vital to their survival,” said Amaroq Weiss, West Coast wolf organizer at the Center for Biological Diversity. “But we support the plan's initial emphasis on restoring wolves to the Golden State and reliance on nonlethal methods to reduce loss of livestock.”

This month marks the five-year anniversary of the arrival in California of wolf OR-7, the first known wild wolf in the state in 87 years. His arrival launched the development of a state wolf plan with input from a stakeholder group representing conservation, ranching and sports-hunting interests. OR-7 eventually returned to Oregon, where he found a mate and has since sired three sets of pups. In August 2015 state wildlife officials confirmed the establishment of California's first wolf family in nearly a century: the Shasta pack in Northern California's Siskiyou County. And just last month, a pair of wolves was confirmed in western Lassen County. DNA-testing of scat collected from the pair shows that the male is a young adult from one of OR-7's litters, while the female is of unknown origin.

“The ongoing arrival of wolves in California is cause for celebration and makes the state wolf plan's provisions all the more important,” stated Kimberly Baker, public land advocate for the Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC). “Wolf recovery will bring the essence of wild back to California and reiterates the need for landscape connectivity.”

The plan proposes a phased management approach, in which establishment of four wolf packs for two consecutive years will trigger consideration of more aggressive management of conflicts. After establishment of eight wolf packs for two consecutive years, management actions will become even less protective of wolves. Conservation groups say the reduced protections come too quickly under the plan, and call for an ongoing emphasis on time-proven, research-based nonlethal measures to minimize conflicts with livestock.

“It's exciting that nonlethal methods of reducing wolf-livestock conflicts are such a foundational element of this plan, because we know they work,” said Damon Nagami, a senior attorney in NRDC's Land and Wildlife Program. “We want to give these magnificent animals every possible chance to survive and thrive here in California. So we look forward to working with the Department to ensure that happens.”

The agency received significant public input last year when it released a draft plan for public comment. Changes requested included the need to acknowledge the best available current science on managing conflicts, social tolerance, the importance of protecting wolves from illegal killings, and wolves' critical ecological role. During the comment period, 19 conservation organizations submitted a [joint comment letter](#) on behalf of 2.9 million California residents highlighting 27 key issues of concern in the draft plan. The vast majority of Californians wants wolves protected and also fully

supports the joint efforts of the state, conservation groups, ranchers and hunters to implement nonlethal conflict-prevention measures.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.1 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

The Environmental Protection Information Center (EPIC) advocates for protection and restoration of Northwest California's forests, using an integrated, science-based approach, combining public education, citizen advocacy, and strategic litigation.

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 2 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world's natural resources, public health, and the environment.

Sierra Club California promotes the preservation, restoration, and enjoyment of California's environment, and enables chapters and grassroots activists to speak as one voice to promote California conservation.