

White House Suspends Action on Gray Wolf Delisting

By EVE BYRON - Independent Record - 01/22/09

The Obama Administration has frozen the Department of Interior effort to take gray wolves off the list of animals protected under the Endangered Species Act in the Northern Rockies and Great Lakes regions. In a memorandum issued Tuesday to federal department heads, Barack Obama's chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, wrote that no proposed or final regulations should be sent to the Federal Register for publication until they have been reviewed and approved by new agency heads appointed by the president. Emanuel added that all regulations sent to the Federal Register, but not yet published, also should be withdrawn for review and approval. Last week, the Department of Interior, which oversees endangered species, had said it expected to delist gray wolves after publishing a new rule in the Federal Register this week. That rule hadn't been published as of Wednesday, which means it falls under Emanuel's memo. Hugh Vickery, an Interior spokesman, said he wasn't sure why the publication had been delayed, although he noted it often takes a few days for the paperwork to go through. Both Monday and Tuesday were federal holidays, which could have slowed the process. "So that freeze memo does affect the wolf delisting rules," Vickery said. "They will not go forward. There will be a review of the proposed rules, which will be conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service."

Vickery said that after the review, the proposal could go forward as proposed now; it could go forward with some modifications; or it might not go forward at all. "We have no estimate at this time of how long that review will take, or when a final decision will be made," he added. Environmental groups welcomed a review by Obama administrators, including new Interior Secretary Ken Salazar. Michael Robinson with the Center for Biological Diversity said the pause will afford Obama and Salazar the opportunity to rethink the previous administration's efforts to remove wolves from the endangered species list.

"Rather than remove protections from wolves in a piecemeal fashion, in the isolated locations where they have finally begun to recover from past persecution, the Obama administration should develop and implement a national gray-wolf recovery plan that will ensure the survival of these magnificent animals," Robinson said. Last week, federal officials said they wanted to "reward" wildlife management efforts in Montana, Idaho, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan by giving those states the opportunity to implement their own wolf plans. They said those states have enough wolves on the landscape that they no longer meet the requirements for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The officials added, though, that Wyoming's current management plan doesn't address issues raised in a lawsuit filed in federal court last year by 12 environmental groups. In June, U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy agreed with the groups and issued an injunction against the delisting, citing a lack of genetic diversity and connectivity of habitat. The Department of Interior then withdrew its proposal, only to announce a new version last week. But members of groups involved in the lawsuit said delisting remains premature, and argue that proposed wolf hunts along with other aspects of approved state management plans would once again bring wolves to the brink of extinction. Jenny Harbine, an associate attorney with the Earthjustice in Bozeman, which represents some of the groups involved in the lawsuit to block the delisting, said the Obama Administration's action was expected and appreciated. "This gives the new Interior secretary an opportunity to recognize the

significant threats to wolves that are still in place and take this delisting rule off the table," Harbine said. "In their legal and policy review, we think they will find this rule was hastily crafted and not legally sound. However, the Department of the Interior could review the measure and resubmit it for delisting gray wolves, she added. Gray wolves were listed as an endangered species in the Northern Rockies, and as a threatened species in the Great Lakes region, in the 1970s. Reintroduction efforts have bolstered their numbers to around 4,000 in the Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, and about 1,500 in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and portions of Washington, Oregon and Utah. The minimum recovery goal for wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains is 300 wolves with 30 breeding pairs for three consecutive years. That level was reached in 2002 and has been exceeded every year since. Federal officials said the number of wolves seems to have stabilized at around 400 in Montana, 780 in Idaho and 350 in Wyoming. However, wildlife advocacy groups point out that 245 wolves were killed last year by government agencies and ranchers in the Northern Rockies, including 27 wolves in one pack alone, mainly for livestock predations. Those killings include 102 wolves in Montana, 101 in Idaho and 42 in Wyoming. Tom Palmer, spokesman for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, said they anticipated this would happen, so nothing in Montana has changed regarding wolf management. "We'll wait to see how the new administration views this proposal," Palmer said. "We are encouraging them to go forward with delisting. But there's no way we can tell which way they're leaning."