

California drafts plan for gray wolves

By Scott Smith, AP

Gray wolves could be stripped of state endangered species protections once at least 50 of the animals are roaming in California, wildlife officials said last week.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife released a draft plan for managing gray wolves, which were granted protections last year but whose numbers are growing. It outlines efforts to minimize livestock loss and ways to ensure there's enough prey for wolves, other predators and hunters.

Under California's protections, gray wolves can't be killed or hunted. U.S. law also protects wolves in most of the nation, except for Idaho, Montana and parts of Washington, Oregon and Utah, but there is a pending proposal to strip federal protections from most of the Lower 48 states, including California.

Once there are between 50 and 75 wolves in California, the state's proposal suggests considering whether wolves should be removed from a list of endangered animals.

Wolves were hunted to extinction in California nearly a century ago, but a lone wolf called OR-7 crossed the northern border from Oregon in 2011, marking their return. Remote cameras in Siskiyou County earlier this year captured two adults and five pups, called the Shasta Pack.

Environmentalists herald their return as an icon of California's western landscape, while ranchers fear wolf packs will kill valuable livestock.

Fifty doesn't sound like many wolves, but Northern California

doesn't have enough wild prey to support that number of predators, said Kirk Wilbur, spokesman for the California Cattlemen's Association. He fears that wolves will remain forever under the state's protection, depriving ranchers of the ability to kill them and protecting their cattle.

"We had concerns with listing them in the first place," Wilbur said.

Amaroq Weiss, a wolf advocate at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the state proposes removing protections for gray wolves just as they gain a solid foothold in California.

"We disagree with the proposal to weaken protections before wolves have truly recovered in California," she said.

However, any discussion of removing protections at this point is premature, said Jordan Traverso, a spokeswoman for the Department of Fish and Wildlife. She said it is hard to know whether wolves will flourish to that degree in California.

"It's impossible to speculate what Mother Nature would do," Traverso said. "We have no idea."

Officials will take public comment on the plan through mid-February before it is adopted. Comments will also be accepted via e-mail at atwolfplan@wildlife.ca.gov.