

## **22 DECEMBER 2006**

### **Feds to Start Removing Wolf Protections**

The head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Tuesday his agency will start removing federal protections from gray wolves in Montana and Idaho by January, regardless of whether Wyoming has submitted an acceptable plan to manage its own wolves by then.

Fish and Wildlife Director Dale Hall said his agency is moving ahead with Idaho and Montana where management plans are already in place.

Wolves were reintroduced to the northern Rocky Mountains a decade ago after being hunted to near-extinction, and now number more than 1,200 in the region. With the rising population, state officials including Idaho Gov. Jim Risch and Montana Gov. Brian Schweitzer have been pushing the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove Endangered Species Act protections that the officials say hamper control efforts aimed at stopping the predators from eating livestock, as well as elk that are prized by hunters.

The region where wolves would no longer have federal protections would include all of Idaho, Montana, eastern Washington and Oregon and a small sliver of northeastern Utah. Wolves that wander outside those areas would still fall under federal protections, said Mitch King, a Fish and Wildlife Service regional director in Denver.

Under the federal plan, states could have complete oversight of their wolves within 12 months, Risch said.

Idaho is estimated to have 650 wolves in about 60 packs, while Montana has 270 and Wyoming 309.

After delisting, Idaho's federally approved wolf-management plan requires maintaining a minimum of 15 packs, while Montana has a benchmark of 15 breeding pairs.

Both states already have most day-to-day oversight of their wolves; sanctioned control actions every year kill dozens of the predators suspected of killing or harassing cattle. Still, Idaho and Montana lack the authority to schedule legal hunts or kill wolves for reasons such as helping restore elk herds.