

Jon Tester United States Senator for Montana

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Wolf protections expected to be lifted by Congress

Associated Press
Matthew Brown
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An attachment to a federal budget bill needed to avert a government shutdown would take gray wolves off the endangered species list across most of the Northern Rockies.

Wildlife advocates conceded Tuesday the wolf provision was all but certain to remain in the spending bill after efforts to remove it failed. Congress faces a tight deadline on a budget plan already months overdue, and the rider has bipartisan support.

It orders the Obama administration to lift protections for wolves within 60 days in five Western states.

Protections would remain intact in Wyoming, at least for now. But wolf hunting would resume this fall in Idaho and Montana, where an estimated 1,250 of the animals have been blamed in hundreds of livestock attacks and for declines seen in some big game herds. Wolves also would be returned to state management in Washington, Oregon and Utah.

Lawmakers said they inserted the rider to circumvent a federal judge who repeatedly blocked proposals to hunt the predators.

The legislation would block further court intervention.

"We needed to figure out a way to manage these critters just like we manage other wildlife, and this is the way to do it," Sen. Jon Tester said in an interview with The Associated Press. "If you take a look at impacts wolves have had on domestic livestock, on our big game, it is not deniable that it has been extensive."

Wolves were wiped out across most of the United States last century under a government bounty program established to benefit the agriculture industry. They were reintroduced to Wyoming and Idaho in the mid-1990s, and at least 1,651 now roam parts of five states.

Only a few dozen of the animals so far have colonized Washington and Oregon and no packs are known to exist in Utah.

Idaho and Montana officials were forced to cancel wolf hunts planned last

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year when U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy restored protections for the species. Those plans are expected to be updated to allow hunting this fall for potentially hundreds of wolves.

Wildlife advocates had sought to stop the legislation through a settlement on the issue with the Obama administration announced last month. But that settlement was scuttled in court by U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy, who cited dissension among some environmentalists who characterized the deal as politically-motivated sellout.

Mike Leahy, with Defenders of Wildlife, said the time to head off congressional action "has come and gone." He said his group was turning its attention to the states, in hopes of averting overhunting that could drive wolves again to the brink of extinction.

"The real threat here is the states grinding down wolf populations in response to anti-wolf rhetoric over time," Leahy said. "They can chip away at the population and manage them down to 100, 150 wolves if they want."

Wyoming lawmakers inserted language into the bill to uphold a ruling on wolves by another judge last year that was favorable to their state. However, the ruling said only that the government must reconsider Wyoming's wolf management proposal _ not necessarily accept it.

Wyoming Republican Rep. Cynthia Lummis said she hoped the rider would "clear away obstacles so that meaningful negotiations can continue" between the state and federal officials.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has said Wyoming law is too hostile to the predators, because it would allow them to be shot on sight across most of the state.