

The Crown Jewels of the Rockies in Serious Trouble

Idaho became famous for its potatoes, but its real crown jewels are the elk, moose, and deer herds that grace its breathtaking landscapes. Unfortunately, the day is soon approaching when it will be an uncommon sight to find the mountains with any significant numbers of big game.

Those who believed that the reintroduction of wolves would have minimal impacts on the herds need to spend some time in the mountains. According to Idaho Fish and Game some herds are already in serious trouble. Speaking of the low number of calves per cows in the elk herds of the LoLo and Selway zones of the Clearwater the IDF&G stated in 2006, "This level of recruitment is inadequate to sustain natural mortality in the absence of hunting." The LoLo and the Selway zones are full of wolves.

In an attempt to curtail the low calf recruitment numbers the IDF&G petitioned the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 2005 to eliminate 43 wolves under the 10(j) amendment to the endangered species act. Their petition was summarily denied; inconclusive evidence. Meanwhile the wolves continue to multiply and our elk, moose, and deer continue to die.

In 1995, 66 wolves were reintroduced into Central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park. Twelve years later, there are roughly 800 wolves in Idaho with another 800 in Yellowstone and Western Montana. The impact on the northern Yellowstone herd can only be described as catastrophic.

Yellowstone has become a predator's pit. Uncontrolled the wolf and bear populations have exploded. In 1995, the northern Yellowstone elk herd numbered 19,000 head. Ten years later, after the reintroduction of the wolves, the herd is now under 9,000. In a few years the elk, moose, and deer herds will all but disappear. Idaho, due to its larger area is declining more slowly. However, the numbers are indisputable; the herds in many locations are taking a major hit from the wolves. It is only a matter of time before Idaho's herds catch up to the Yellowstone herds unless there is a drastic reduction of wolves.

In an attempt to mitigate the damages to the big game herds and the domestic livestock operations, Idaho agreed to a wolf management plan along with Montana and recently Wyoming. According to Steve Nadeau, the large carnivore manager for Idaho, now that the three states have wolf plans, wolves will be delisted in February 2008 and hunting will begin. In the same breath at a recent Anti-Wolf Coalition meeting he admitted 27 environmental groups were lined up with law suits in hand to file for injunctions to the proposed delisting.

The truth is if and when the US Fish and Wildlife service ever delists the wolves for hunting, the states will immediately be stopped by court actions. In the mean time, the wolves will continue to multiply and the big game herds will continue to decline.

What are Idaho's options? #1. Stay in the wolf plan and wait for the day when the court injunctions are removed, which could take a decade or more, all while the big game herds continue to decline. Or, #2 pull out of the wolf plan and demand the Federal government remove the wolves. And if they won't, we must! It is time Idaho made a stand to save our crown jewels; the majestic big game herds we have spent decades building.

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