

Wisconsin officials say gray wolf population seems stable

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MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The gray wolf population in Wisconsin may have stabilized after nearing extinction decades ago, state wildlife officials said.

The population ranges from 914 to 978 wolves, according to a count by the state Department of Natural Resources taken from April 2018 to April 2019. That is a 1% increase from the last count, the agency said.

"The last three winter track surveys suggested fairly similar numbers of wolves and that follows really two decades of sustained population growth," Scott Walter, DNR large carnivore specialist, told Wisconsin Public Radio for a story published Thursday. "It looks like numbers are leveling off."

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There were once about 5,000 wolves in Wisconsin, but hunting nearly brought the population to extinction. In 1980, the state had 25 wolves, according to the DNR. The animal was placed back on the endangered species list after a federal judge's ruling in 2014.

Walter said the state conducts wolf monitoring to provide information to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which tracks the national population. The Interior Department launched an effort to delist the species in March.

Some scientists argue the state hasn't been fully transparent and complain that

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government in its decisions on gray wolves under the Endangered Species Act," said Adrian Treves, professor of environmental studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

But the DNR stands by the count.

"These are minimum counts. They are fairly intensely done by the Wisconsin DNR. They are a reliable indicator of the growth of the population that's probably a little bit less than what the actual population is," said Adrian Wydeven, a former DNR wildlife biologist. "There are also efforts by the DNR to develop new methods for monitoring the population."

Meanwhile, the Humane Society of the United States is concerned that the state could allow the reintroduction of wolf hunting.

"Time and again, state wildlife agencies have ignored the best available science and shown a propensity to lean (toward) the interest of trophy hunters and trappers and not the wishes of the majority public," the group's state director Megan Nicholson wrote in an email.

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