

Feds face lawsuits over Idaho wolf-killing derby

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Environmental groups filed lawsuits Tuesday in Idaho and Washington, D.C., seeking to force federal officials to reveal reasons behind allowing a wolf- and coyote-shooting contest in parts of Idaho.

The lawsuits contend the U.S. Bureau of Land Management is violating the Freedom of Information Act by withholding records sought by the Center for Biological Diversity and Western Watersheds Project.

Steve Alder of Idaho for Wildlife said the group isn't holding its Predator Hunting Contest this winter because hunters were unable to kill any wolves the previous two winters.

"We don't care about lawsuits, but we failed miserably at harvesting a wolf," Alder said. "There's no point getting sponsorships and doing this and that and not being able to get a wolf."

The group overcame lawsuits to hold the events on private land and U.S. Forest Service land the past two winters.

The latest lawsuits concern Freedom of Information Act requests made on Dec. 1, 2014, and on July 31, 2015.

Meg Townsend, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the lawsuits will move forward even though the derby is off for this winter.

"It could happen next year, or any number of years in the future," she said. "And without this information we've requested from the BLM, it's very difficult to know how they would regulate these wildlife-killing contests."

She also said the remote and rugged area in east-central Idaho is considered key for a sustainable wolf population in the state.

"We would like to know why wolves are being allowed to be killed in this important habitat, and why the BLM has pushed this decision underground," Townsend said.

The BLM didn't immediately have a comment on the litigation.

The previous predator derbies both faced lawsuits. The first event was allowed on public Forest Service land outside Salmon, Idaho, after a federal judge ruled organizers didn't need to get a special permit from the agency.

The group secured a permit from the BLM for the following winter and greatly expanded the area of the hunt. However, that federal agency withdrew the permit following two lawsuits filed by seven environmental groups, including one from Oregon concerned that killing wolves in Idaho would prevent the animals from expanding into that state.

The cancellation didn't mention the lawsuits but said modifications to derby rules made by the pro-hunting group left it unclear if the permit could still apply without further analysis.

Alder at the time rejected the explanation, saying the agency couldn't withstand the criticism and looked to blame someone else.

Alder said the difficulty hunting rarely seen wolves led to the decision to not hold the event this winter. However, he said a wolf started howling nearby while he was camping with his son during an archery elk hunt in September.

"It was kind of neat to hear one howling in the middle of the night," he said. "I'm talking within 100 yards. It sounds hypocritical — they're beautiful animals and I love to hear them — but I wish they weren't on the landscape."

The contest last year offered a \$1,000 prize each for whoever killed the most wolves and coyotes. About 100 hunters killed 30 coyotes but no wolves.

