

IDFG wants wolf hunting season

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By Eric Barker of the Tribune

Agency officials will meet with Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter Monday to work on setting hunting season next fall

Smith and Cannon

Officials at the Idaho Department of Fish and Game plan to conduct a wolf hunting season in the fall and said they will meet with Gov. C.L. (Butch) Otter Monday to determine the necessary steps.

On Friday, President Barack Obama signed a budget bill into law that will lead to wolf delisting within 60 days. The law includes language that makes a 2009 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wolf delisting rule valid and returns wolves to state management. The rule covers wolves in Idaho, Montana, northern Utah, eastern Washington and eastern Oregon.

Idaho conducted a hunting season in 2009, when wolves were removed from Endangered Species Act protection. Wolves were later returned to federal control and last year the Idaho Fish and Game Commission suspended a five-year species management plan for wolves used to establish the hunting season. That plan called for the state to reduce the wolf population from about 800 down to 518 over five years and was used to set a harvest quota of 220. Otter ordered the department to stop managing wolves as long as they remained listed.

Jim Unsworth, deputy director of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, said a meeting Monday would help determine what if any changes have to be made.

"We will be ready to have another hunting season," he said.

Otter has not taken action on a bill passed by the Idaho Legislature that would declare a wolf emergency in the state and allow him to enlist local law enforcement officers to shoot wolves. On Thursday, Otter said he has some concerns over the bill because it infringes on the powers of the executive branch.

Otter also indicated he would wait to see if the president signed the budget bill before he takes action.

Under the terms of the 2009 delisting rule, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will continue to monitor wolves for five years. Ed Bangs, wolf recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Helena, Mont., said officials in Idaho and Montana would do the monitoring and file reports to the service.

"It's not that big a deal," he said. "The states will do annual reports and the service will look at them and go 'Yeah, wolves are doing good.' "

He said his agency will simply make sure wolf populations don't fall below those outlined in the rule, and no new policies or laws in the states threaten the continued existence of the species. It is not clear if the wolf emergency bill would raise concerns with the agency.

Bangs disputed claims made by some environmental groups that congressional delisting is the triumph of politics over science. He said the language added to the budget bill only made the 2009 rule stick.

Last year, federal Judge Donald Molloy of Missoula, Mont., overturned the rule because it failed to include Wyoming and was not science-based. Bangs said it's legitimate to debate if Congress should have gotten involved but "there is absolutely no doubt delisting is based on rock-solid science. It went through peer-review. It is state-of-the-art stuff."