



February 16, 2021

The Honorable Scott de la Vega
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Acting Secretary de la Vega,

Safari Club International (SCI) and Safari Club International Foundation (SCIF), on behalf of the hunters and conservationists across the U.S. that make up our 50,000 members, are deeply concerned with the Administration's directive to review, and potentially repeal, recent federal regulatory changes regarding revisions to regulations implementing the Endangered Species Act (ESA), delisting the gray wolf, and removing restrictions on certain hunting practices on National Preserves in Alaska. Repealing these regulations is unnecessary. They comport with the law, as well as the Administration's goals of relying on science and advancing equity across the government. Repeal will be detrimental to vulnerable species and vulnerable communities who rely on sustainable use of wildlife for their livelihoods.

First, the Department should preserve the 2019 rule clarifying that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) must consider the same factors in removing a species from the ESA lists of endangered or threatened species as it does when adding a species to those lists. Prior to the Department's adjustment to the ESA implementing regulations in 2019, rules concerning the delisting of species were more ambiguous than the rules pertaining to listing species. As a result, fully recovered animal species like the gray wolf faced relentless legal obstacles to delisting despite the fact the Department and the FWS have [considered](#) the wolf's "[spectacular](#)" recovery "one of the greatest comebacks for an animal in U.S. conservation history."

The FWS has authority to interpret and implement the ESA. The 2019 regulations do exactly this and resolve conflicting court decisions that were inconsistent with Congressional intent in the ESA. The FWS may only list a species when it finds the species requires the ESA's protections applying the listing factors in ESA Section 4(a). When a species' status does not meet these factors, the ESA mandates delisting because the species simply does not meet the definition of an endangered or threatened species. Repeal of the 2019 rule, or at least this provision of the rule, would run counter to the ESA's clear language.

Second, the gray wolf delisting is guided by the best available science. Gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes states (Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin) have greatly exceeded recovery criteria for over two decades. The FWS has sought to delist these wolves since 2003—including a [proposed rule](#) published in 2013 under the Obama Administration. The delisting is scientifically supported and thus is consistent with the objective to rely on science in decision-making.

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Although courts have reversed prior delisting rules for some populations of wolves, their reasoning has generally not been based on a lack of scientific support. The courts' rulings have primarily been based on the FWS' interpretation of the ESA and its authority to delist specific segments of the gray wolf population in the United States.

Further, it is offensive to the states to suggest that they will not scientifically or properly manage gray wolves within their borders—particularly as their management plans were approved by the FWS well before the Trump Administration. States in the Northern Rocky Mountains region (Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming) have [successfully](#) managed wolves since they were removed from the ESA lists in 2011. It is important that the Biden administration, which emphasizes the voice of scientists when crafting climate change or COVID-19 policies, avoid hypocrisy by trusting wildlife and conservation scientists at the state level.

Third, the Department should maintain the June 2020 rule removing certain restrictions on hunting on National Preserves in Alaska. That rule properly defers to state wildlife management authority and protects the resource needs and traditional cultural practices of Alaska Natives.

Preserving the 2020 rule is also consistent with the January 20, 2021 [executive order](#) establishing racial equity as a bedrock principle for federal policy going forward. Maintaining these policies does more to advance racial equity than their repeal.

In Alaska, much of the attention surrounding the withdrawal of the 2015 rule has focused on traditional and culturally important hunting methods implemented by Alaska Native communities in remote parts of the state. For example, the harvest of hibernating bears in dens is practiced by an Alaska Native community in the Alaskan bush. A handful of bears—at most—are taken this way each year, largely depending on the severity of the winter. It is simply not accurate to suggest that “trophy hunters” want to utilize the hunting methods at issue in the rule, despite sensationalized reports to the contrary.

The 2020 rule permits Alaska Natives to continue these traditional hunting methods. To deprive them of their ability to engage in these practices, without deference to the State's participatory process in which the practices were authorized at the request of these communities, also violates the President's [order](#) to “reaffirm the Federal Government's Commitment to Tribal Sovereignty and Consultation.”

As our country progresses through President Biden's first 100 days in office, SCI and SCIF encourage your Department to consider that the envisioned repeal of certain rules and regulations implemented over the past four years will ultimately do more harm than good to wildlife conservation as well as to racial equity in our country. The science supporting this position is clear and it is important the current administration listen to the evidence just as enthusiastically as it does in other areas such as climate change. SCI and SCIF look forward to working with the Department to advance the interests of conservation and ensuring equity in Department actions.

Sincerely,



W. Laird Hamberlin

CEO

Safari Club International,

Safari Club International Foundation

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