Gray wolves (*canis lupis*) in Colorado are considered “endangered” at both the federal and state level by their inclusion on the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Threatened and Endangered Species List and the Colorado Threatened and Endangered List. According to Colorado Parks & Wildlife (CPW), the last gray (timber) wolves were killed in Colorado in the 1940’s. Also according to CPW, “the best available science does not support the contention that the Mexican wolf was the wolf historically common to Colorado.” In order to understand the wolf issue in Colorado, it’s necessary to understand the wolf history and recovery efforts in the Northern Rockies.

By the 1930’s, gray wolves were nearly extirpated in the United States. In 1973 the federal government passed the Endangered Species Act (ESA). With the passage of the Act, wolves were one of the first species to receive federal protection (1974), and the designation applied to all remaining wolf populations in the lower 48 states. Federal protection enabled dispersing Canadian gray wolves to establish packs in the northwestern United States. In 1995-1996, as the result of a forced federal recovery program, 31 Canadian gray wolves were released in Yellowstone National Park, and 35 wolves were released in Central Idaho. The recovery goal within the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Area (WY, ID, MT) of 300 wolves and 30 breeding pairs for 3 consecutive years was reached in 2002. Due to the steady onslaught of legal challenges by wolf advocacy groups, it took ~9 years for the federal government to delist wolves in Montana and Idaho (2011). Despite its thriving wolf population, Wyoming’s management strategies were still under attack by activists from within and outside the USFWS, and it took ~15 years to delist wolves in Wyoming (2017). In 2015, the Northern Rocky Mountain (NRM) wolf population was estimated at more than 1,700 wolves. Gray wolves (NRM) are no longer federal listed as an endangered species and are managed under state authority in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, eastern Oregon, eastern Washington, and north central Utah.

Canadian gray wolves have naturally dispersed from the original three-state NRM wolf recovery area to colonize Washington, Oregon, California, Utah; and a few dispersers have been confirmed in Colorado. Outside of the NRM recovery area and the Mexican wolf recovery area (southwest Arizona and New Mexico), wolves are still federally listed as endangered.

In November 2018, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Manage Our Wolves Act HR6784 that would delist gray wolves in the lower 48 states and protect the delisting from judicial review. Unfortunately, the Senate has not done its job to vote on and pass this bill. Therefore, gray wolves remain a federally listed species in Colorado. Reviewing historic evidence on Mexican wolves can only lead to one conclusion: With ninety percent of Mexican wolf habitat in Mexico, no rational discussion about wolves in Colorado should ever include Mexican wolves.

It has long been anticipated that wolves will naturally disperse into Colorado. In 2004, a radio collared wolf was struck and killed by a vehicle on I-70 near Idaho Springs. The wolf originated from the Yellowstone area. In 2009, a dead wolf was found in Rio Blanco county. In 2015, a coyote hunter mistaken killed a wolf; and in 2015 a trail camera captured pictures that appear to be a wolf. It’s also notable that Colorado has wolf-dog hybrids (over 7,000 in 2005 according to USDA APHIS Wildlife Services), and hybrids have been released on public lands by individuals that realize wolf hybrids do not make good pets. There is also considerable concern that wolf advocates may (or have already) illegally released wolves in Colorado. In 2004, the Colorado Division of Wildlife convened the Colorado Wolf Management Working Group which issued the report *Findings and Recommendations for Managing Wolves that Migrate into Colorado.*
In 1982 and 1989, the Colorado Wildlife Commission passed a resolution opposing the introduction of wolves in Colorado. The Colorado Parks & Wildlife Commission reaffirmed this resolution by updating it in 2016. Furthermore, Colorado has legislative language regarding the introduction of endangered species. CRS 33-2-105.5 Section (2) states, “Before any species may be introduced or reintroduced into this state through action by any state or local government entity, the general assembly shall act by bill to specifically name such species and to specify the manner of introduction or reintroduction. The species to be introduced or reintroduced shall be: (a) Not, or no longer, found in this state; and (b) A candidate for listing or has been placed in the threatened or endangered species list pursuant to the federal “Endangered Species Act of 1973”, 16 U.S.C. sec. 1531 et seq., as amended.”

Wolf advocates could use the legislative process and attempt to pass a bill to introduce wolves, or run a ballot initiative. Colorado has one of the most liberal ballot initiative processes in the United States, which enables advocacy groups to circumvent our State Legislature and implement “ballot box management” of our wildlife. The Rocky Mountain Wolf Project (heavily influenced by the Ted Turner Endangered Species Fund) and other advocacy groups have been ramping up activities to prepare for an anticipated 2020 ballot initiative. A statutory initiative is the most likely avenue they will choose, since Colorado now requires state-wide signature collection for constitutional ballot initiatives; and statutory initiatives can pass with a 50 percent plus one margin, and constitutional initiatives require a fifty-five percent margin. Alarmingly, wolf advocacy groups are claiming that western Colorado can support more than 1,000 wolves, which is in excess of the 300 wolves recovery goal that was established for Idaho, Wyoming and Montana combined!

What happens if a legislative bill passes in 2019 or statutory ballot initiative passes in 2020 to force the release of wolves in Colorado? It depends; it depends on several different factors.

If wolves are still federally listed, Colorado Parks and Wildlife would have to consult with the USFWS and develop a 10J nonessential experimental population release and management program. If President Trump is re-elected in 2020, it is unlikely the federal government is going to agree to release wolves in Colorado. If we have a new president in 2020, it is much more likely that the USFWS will focus on “helping” release wolves in Colorado.

If wolves are federally delisted, Colorado Parks and Wildlife would not be required to consult with the USFWS, and would be mandated to follow the directive of the legislative bill or ballot initiative, unless there were legal grounds to challenge it. It is likely that the release and recovery program would be fast-tracked and implemented as soon as possible.

Each scenario will involve years of legal maneuvering and litigation. It’s highly unlikely that Governor Polis’ administration (2019-2022) would challenge a legislative bill or ballot initiative if it passes; and if the legislation or initiative calls for the release of 250 wolves, as advocated by Rocky Mountain Wolf Project, there would be a rapid expansion of wolves to neighboring states. It’s up to concerned citizens of Colorado and the West to stop wolf advocates from forcing the release of wolves in our state.

![Colorado No Wolves](image-url)