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U.S. Forest Service employee under fire for photographing wounded gray wolf before killing it

By [Juliet Eilperin](#)

This post was updated at 7:45 p.m. Thursday.

Less than a year after Congress took [gray wolves](#) off the endangered species list, a Forest Service employee has come under fire for trapping a wolf in Idaho and snapping a photo of the wounded animal before killing it.



A gray wolf at the Wildlife Science Center in Forest Lake, Minn. (Dawn Villella/AP)

Josh Bransford posted a photo on the website www.trapperman.com last month of himself smiling as the wolf he trapped — which was still alive — limped on the bloodied snow behind him. The photo has since been taken down (It can be viewed [here](#), but warning, the images are graphic).

The incident, which came shortly before the end of Idaho's first-ever wolf trapping season, drew protests from environmentalists. Gray wolves in the northern Rockies were taken off the endangered species list on April 2, 2009, a decision that was reversed in federal district court in August 2010. Congress [took them off](#) again as part of [last year's budget deal](#) on April 14, 2011, and the Fish and Wildlife Service formally delisted the wolves on May 4.

Both the Forest Service and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game have described the incident as unfortunate, but not illegal.

"The Forest Service does not condone animal cruelty in any circumstance and holds employees to represent agency standards both on and off the job," wrote Forest Service spokesman Larry Chambers in an e-mail. "While the Forest Service continues to review the case, it has been determined that the employee in question was on his personal time on private land. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game has jurisdiction on such cases."

In an interview, Idaho Department of Fish and Game spokesman Mike Keckler said the agency's conservation officers determined that Bransford "had all of the necessary licenses and permissions to trap wolves," and had undergone a trapper education course.

"According to the conservation officers he did nothing illegal, but we would have preferred that he had dispatched it himself before photographing himself with it," Keckler said. "We ask that animals be dispatched humanely and immediately."

Bransford could not be reached for comment.

Michael Robinson, conservation advocate with the group [Center for Biological Diversity](#), said state officials had only done a cursory review and needed to examine the matter further.

"If this is what passes as compliance with the Department of Fish and Game's rules, there's a serious problem with the adequacy of state regulation," Robinson said. "Idaho Department of Fish and Game or the state's attorney general need to take a harder look. Trapping a wolf where it can be shot at by others, shooting at the wolf, and then letting the injured animal suffer while posing for pictures all constitute animal cruelty and reflect the free-for-all mentality on wolves prevailing in Idaho in the absence of Endangered Species Act protection."

Wolf hunting and trapping season is almost over in Idaho. The trapping season began Nov. 15 and ended March 31, while the hunting season started Aug. 30, 2011 and ended in all but two areas by the Montana border on March 31.

The wolf population in Idaho was estimated at roughly 1000 before the hunting season began. The state fish and game department website showed 377 had been hunted, trapped or snared as of Thursday. Keckler said the state had issued more than 40,000 "wolf tags" that allow wolves to be taken by hunters. The large number came because deer hunters and others obtained the tags in case they encountered wolves while hunting other game.

"Wolves are very difficult to hunt," he said.

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