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As Europe's wolves face moment of truth, scientists decry 'prejudice-driven' attack

The Bern Convention will decide this week whether to grant the EU's demand to lower wolves' protection across the continent.

by [Louise Guillot](#)

BRUSSELS — The European Union's push to lower the protection level of wolves is driven by politics, emotions and prejudices rather than scientific evidence, experts warn ahead of a key meeting this week that will decide the fate of the large carnivore.

Countries that are member of the Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats are [gathering in Strasbourg this week](#) to discuss and vote on a proposal by the EU to downgrade the protection of the wolf from "strictly protected" to "protected."

The EU [will argue](#) that wolves are becoming more numerous across the continent and increasingly threaten farmers' livestock, and thus wants to make it easier for national authorities to grant derogations to kill problematic animals. But scientists reject the claim that wolves are posing a growing menace.

"Wolves are not dangerous to humans" and no lethal attacks on people have been recorded "in centuries," said Ettore Randi, a geneticist and retired researcher at the Italian Institute for Environmental Protection and Research. The amount of damage done by wolves has been "more or less stable during the last few years, so there are not increasing problems," he added.

Mark Fisher, a member of the Wildland Research Institute at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom, also said that "many studies now show that wolves try and avoid people and try and find the least disturbed areas to set up their territories," adding that "the fears about [livestock] depredation are exaggerated."

Fisher and Randi are part of [a chorus of hundreds of experts](#) calling on the EU to reconsider its proposal and on the Bern Convention to reject it later this week, arguing the EU's move is politically motivated and simply unlawful.

This is “a prejudice-driven proposal,” Fisher said, adding that “politics should never be part of ecology.” “Everything leads you to believe that this is a political motive behind this rather than necessarily a scientific motive,” he added, pointing out that the report the European Commission is using to back its proposal is [not based on solid scientific evidence](#) and has not been peer reviewed.

Some observers have suggested that the killing by a wolf of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen’s own pony [prompted the renewed push](#) against the large carnivore — something the EU executive has rejected.

The EU Ombudsman, Emily O’Reilly, also [opened an inquiry](#) into how the Commission prepared this proposal and collected the data to support it.

Little suspense

However, the EU’s proposal is highly likely to pass.

That’s because the EU, with its 27 member countries, already represents more than half of the votes at the Bern Convention, which counts 51 parties.

To go through, a proposal needs [a two-thirds majority](#), meaning at least 34 votes. And the EU is likely to secure them, unless some of its countries break ranks from [the common position](#) agreed in September.

In 2022, Switzerland had put forward a similar proposal to downgrade the protection status of wolves, but only Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Liechtenstein and Turkey voted in favor, while the EU and the U.K. [voted against](#) and Monaco, Norway and Serbia abstained. If those countries take the same position this week, the EU’s bid is likely to get through.

Fisher admitted he is “not optimistic” about the vote. But if the Bern Convention agrees to downgrading the protection level of wolves, scientists won’t back down, Randi said.

If it passes, countries will have to enact the change in their national legislation. In the EU, the Commission will have to amend the Habitats Directive.

Making such changes can take one to two years, according to Randi. "In this lag of time, I think that we, as scientists, have a lot of work to do and also a chance to influence the countries" and push them to keep the wolf strictly protected, he said.

Fisher also pointed out that the EU Habitats Directive allows member countries to keep the wolf under strict protection if they wish to. The Bern Convention also "says you can enact stricter legislation than is provided here," he said, adding that countries could "disregard" the outcome of the vote and "set up their own level of strict protection."