By Laura Zuckerman
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Nearly 40,000 oppose Idaho wolf-hunting contest

SALMON Idaho (Reuters) - A controversial hunting contest in Idaho that rewards killing the most wolves and other animals on public lands has generated nearly 40,000 comments by those opposed to an event that requires a federal permit, U.S. land managers said on Tuesday.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) is expected next week to issue a decision on the special recreation permit requested by a group called Idaho for Wildlife to hold the competition on millions of acres of public rangelands in east central Idaho each January for five years.

The so-called predator derby would see as many as 500 hunters targeting wolves, coyotes, jackrabbits, starlings, skunks, weasels and raccoons for cash and prizes.

The contest is opposed by animal-rights activists as a “gratuitous wildlife massacre”, but it is endorsed by some sportsmen and ranchers who say predators like wolves and coyotes are harming cattle and game animals like elk.

“If the BLM’s final determination is to grant the permit, we’re going to see more of this kind of gratuitous wildlife massacre all across the West,” said Camilla Fox, head of Project Coyote, which opposes unregulated killing of predators.

The event comes as animal-rights activists mark an increase in predator contests in Western states like Oregon, New Mexico and California, where wildlife managers in December will vote on a proposal to ban such competitions.

Organizers of the contest planned near the ranching community of Salmon are the first to apply for a special government permit to use public lands.

Opponents fear approval will set a precedent that will open the way for similar events in parts of the American West where the bulk of land is managed by the federal government.

The BLM is assessing the contest’s impact on such things as roads, grazing allotments and habitat for imperiled animals.

Steve Alder, executive director of Idaho for Wildlife, which bills itself as fighting “all radical anti-hunting and anti-gun environmentalists”, said critics have no understanding of the threats presented by wolves and coyotes to livestock and big-game animals.

Linda Price, manager of the BLM field office in Salmon, said Tuesday that the agency received nearly 40,000 letters, the vast majority electronic, in opposition to the contest during a public comment period that closed last week. Sixteen letters expressed support.

The event in Idaho last year saw contestants kill no wolves and 23 coyotes.

(Reporting by Laura Zuckerman in Salmon, Idaho; Editing by Eric M. Johnson and Ryan Woo)