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For Immediate Release

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Petition to End Trapping of Rare Wolverine Filed in Montana

Helena, MT – Today the Western Environmental Law Center, on behalf of eight conservation groups and one individual, submitted a formal petition to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (“MFWP”) to end the trapping of wolverine in Montana. Montana is the only state in the entire contiguous United States that still allows wolverines to be trapped for their fur. Up to five wolverines (or three females) can be trapped and killed in Montana each year.

Wolverines resemble a small bear that is custom built for high-elevation, mountain living. They have large, crampon-clawed feet designed for digging, climbing, and walking on snow, an extremely high metabolic rate, and a double fur coat that includes a dense inner layer of wool beneath a cover of frost-shedding guard hairs.

Once prolific across the West, the wolverine population in the lower 48 is now down to no more than 250-300 individuals. Montana has the highest concentration of wolverine in the lower 48, but still only about 100-175 individuals. A substantial number of these individuals are likely unsuccessful breeders or non-breeding subadults. This means the “effective population” of individuals who are able to breed and contribute to the next generation in Montana is significantly smaller, perhaps less than 50.

So rare are these native carnivores that in December, 2010, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (“Service”) designated wolverine a “candidate” species that is currently awaiting protections under the federal Endangered Species Act. The Service determined that an already small and vulnerable population of wolverine in the lower 48 will continue to decline in the face of climate change, which is shrinking the amount of available wolverine habitat in Montana (wolverine depend on late spring snow and cold temperatures) and increasing the speed by which isolated populations are lost. Warming temperatures are also increasing the distance and thus fragmentation between patches of habitat.

“Authorizing the trapping of wolverines under these circumstances is making a bad situation worse” said Matthew Bishop, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center who is representing the groups. “Wolverines are tough animals but they need all the help they can get right now in the face of a warming planet, shrinking habitat, and increased isolation. Montana shouldn’t be kicking them when they’re down.” added Bishop.

Trapping is a major source of wolverine mortality in Montana and has had significant negative effects on subpopulations inhabiting Montana's small, isolated island ranges. In one study, of the 14 wolverines instrumented and followed in the Pioneer Mountains during a three year period, 6 were killed in traps, including 4 adult males and two pregnant females. As a result, the wolverine population in the Pioneers was reduced by an estimated 50%. Wolverine are also accidentally killed and caught in traps left for other species.

"We're lucky to see wolverine on rare occasion here in the Swan Range of northwest Montana, where they were first studied back in the 1970's" said Keith Hammer, Chair of petitioner Swan View Coalition. "Trapping killed five times more wolverine than natural causes in a population that can ill afford it, killing nearly two-thirds of the wolverines being studied in just five years. Trapping must stop if these rare and wonderful animals are to return from the brink of extinction."

The coalition of groups and one individual who joined the petition are now asking MFWP to end the trapping of wolverine before the 2012 trapping season begins on December 1, 2012. "This is the right thing to do -- morally, scientifically, socially, and ecologically --for the future of wolverine and the future of trapping in Montana" said Gary Ingman, a board member of the Helena Hunters and Anglers Association, a local sportsmen's group. "The biological models show that the current population levels simply are not self-sustaining" added Ingman.

Follow this link to read the petition:

The Western Environmental Law Center is a non-profit public interest law firm that uses the power of the law to defend and protect the American West's treasured landscapes, iconic wildlife and rural communities.

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