



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

# Wolf Tracks

## *A Summary of Gray Wolf Activities and Issues*

July, 2000

### **Introduction**

This is the fourth issue of “Wolf Tracks”, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s update on gray wolf issues. This issue focuses on our recent proposal to reclassify and delist gray wolves in portions of the United States. After reading this issue, if you have specific questions or know of someone who would like to receive “Wolf Tracks”, please contact our Gray Wolf Line at 612-713-7337 or at [graywolfmail@fws.gov](mailto:graywolfmail@fws.gov). Wolf Tracks is also available on the Web at <http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf>.

### **Summary of the Proposal to Reclassify/Delist the Gray Wolf**



Gray wolves once roamed most of the North American continent, but by the mid-1900s only a small population remained in the lower 48 states in Minnesota and on Isle Royale, Michigan, and a few non-breeding wolves were observed in the West. Since first listed under the Endangered Species Act (Act) in 1974, recovery programs have helped gray wolf populations rebound. Today, wolf recovery has almost been achieved in the western Great Lakes states. In the West, reintroduced gray wolves in Wyoming and Idaho complement a naturally recovering population in Montana.

These successes have prompted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service or we) to propose a change in the status of the gray wolf under the Endangered Species Act. This proposed rule, recently published in the Federal Register, addresses the status of gray wolves in most of the United States and Mexico. It does not affect Mexican gray wolves in the southwestern United States and Mexico, gray wolves in Alaska or Canada, or the red wolf, a separate species found in the Southeast.

### *The Proposal*

The Service proposal announces the intent to (1) focus future gray wolf recovery efforts only in certain portions of the species’ historical range, (2) recognize recovery progress and adjust the degree of protection under the Act in some of those areas to further promote recovery and (3) eliminate the protections of the Act in the remaining portions of the species’ range where recovery actions are not necessary or feasible.

*The Proposal;*  
*Continued*

The proposal recommends establishing four gray wolf “distinct population segments” (DPS) in the Lower 48 States. A DPS is a population that is considered to be partially or completely isolated from other populations and which contributes significantly to the species. Each DPS would be addressed separately based on its current status under the Endangered Species Act.

The Western Great Lakes Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segment includes gray wolves in North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Gray wolves throughout this region are currently listed as endangered, except for those in Minnesota, which are listed as threatened. Threatened is a less critical designation. Gray wolves in this DPS which are currently listed as endangered would be reclassified to threatened. The development of a section 4(d) special rule would allow for lethal control of wolves attacking domestic animals in North Dakota, South Dakota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, similar to the current special rule for Minnesota wolves. Wolves in Minnesota would retain their current legal status of threatened.

### Current Listing

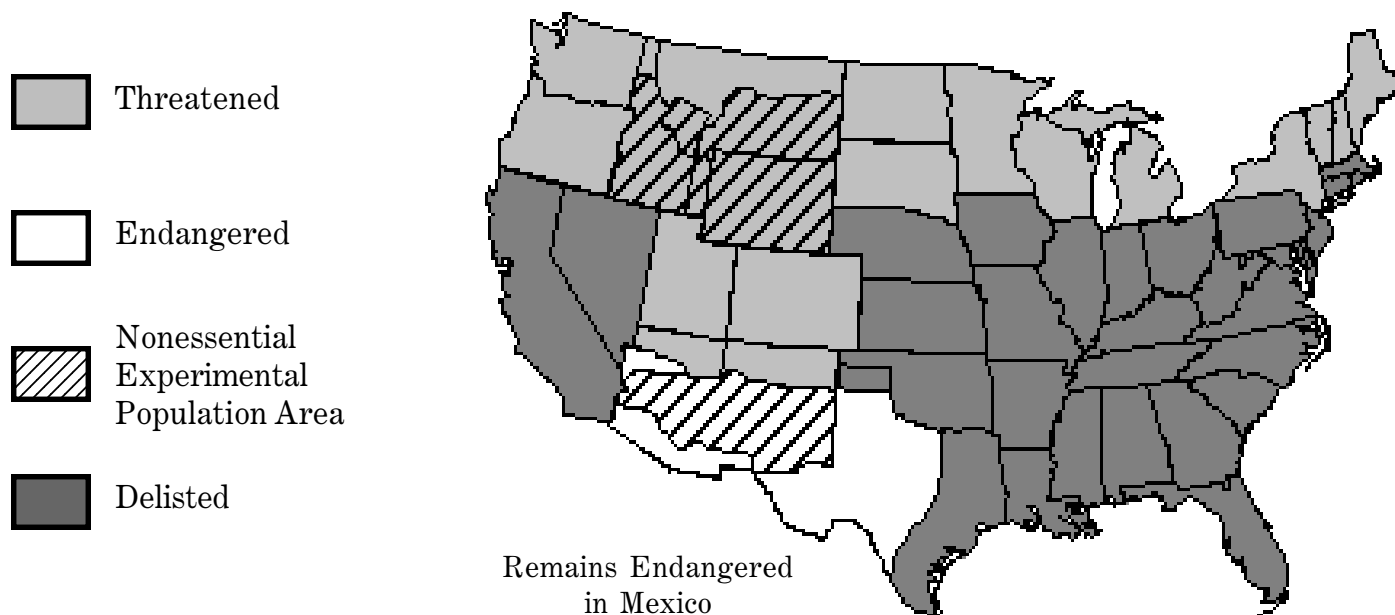


The Northeastern Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segment includes wolves that may occur in New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, and Maine. We are proposing to reclassify wolves in these states from “endangered” to “threatened,” a status that retains their Federal protection but affords much more flexibility in managing wolves. Threatened status would allow the Service to work closely with state, tribal, and local governments to investigate various methods to recover wolves in this part of their historical range.

The Western Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segment includes wolves in the states of Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, northern Arizona, and northern New Mexico. The Service's proposal would give naturally occurring gray wolves in this region, including those in north-western Montana and wolves thought to inhabit the state of Washington, the designation of threatened. Wolf populations reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho would retain their current nonessential, experimental status.

The Southwestern Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segment includes gray wolves in southern Arizona, southern New Mexico, west Texas, and Mexico. Wolves within the existing non-essential, experimental population area would retain their experimental designation. The wolves outside of the non-essential, experimental population area are listed as endangered and would not be affected by this proposal.

### Proposed Listing



#### States not included in a Distinct Population Segment

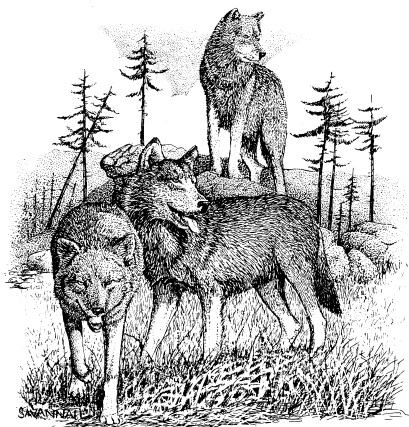
Gray wolves would be delisted in all or portions of those Lower 48 States not otherwise included within the four distinct population segments.

*Summary Continued;  
Status of Wolves in Each  
DPS (Basis for Service  
Proposal)*

Western Great Lakes Gray Wolf DPS. The focus of recovery efforts in the eastern United States has been on wolves in Minnesota. Drafted in 1978 and revised in 1992, the Federal recovery plan provided goals for recovery (delisting) that included the assurance of survival of Minnesota wolves and a recommended state population of 1,251 to 1,400 animals. In addition, the plan called for at least one other viable wolf population outside of Minnesota and Isle Royale National Park, Michigan. During the winter of 1997-98, there were an estimated 2,445 wolves in Minnesota. In late winter of 1999-2000, 248 wolves were counted in Wisconsin, and 216 in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (along with 29 on Isle Royale). The Wisconsin-Michigan population constitutes the second viable wolf population called for in the recovery plan. Single animals have also been reported in North and South Dakota, likely dispersing from Minnesota and Canada. If this proposal is finalized, the Service will review the recovery plan for the Rocky Mountain wolves to reflect the DPS listing

Western Gray Wolf DPS. The recovery plan for wolves in the northern U.S. Rocky Mountains was completed in 1980 and revised in 1987. It sets recovery goals for three recovery areas in the region: northwestern Montana, central Idaho, and the Yellowstone National Park area. If two of these recovery areas support a population of 10 breeding pairs for three years, wolves in the northern Rockies can be reclassified from endangered to threatened. When all three recovery areas maintain 10 breeding pairs (about 100 wolves in each recovery area) for three years, the animals can be delisted.

Wolf numbers have increased steadily throughout the Western DPS. In northwestern Montana, wolves dispersing from Canada established a small population in 1986. Currently the area supports a minimum of 63 wolves in 5 packs. Their numbers are expected to increase in the future. In the Central Idaho reintroduction area, there were at least 141 wolves in 1999, including 10 packs that produced pups. The reintroduced wolves in Yellowstone National Park have also thrived. In the summer of 1999, Yellowstone hosted about 118 wolves, including 8 reproducing packs. This marked the third consecutive year in which at least 20 packs produced pups and there were over 200 wolves alive at year-end.



Wolves in other areas within the Western DPS, such as most of Washington and Oregon, are not covered by existing recovery plans. Any wolves in these areas, as part of the Western population segment, would be reclassified from endangered to threatened under this proposal.

Southwestern Gray Wolf DPS

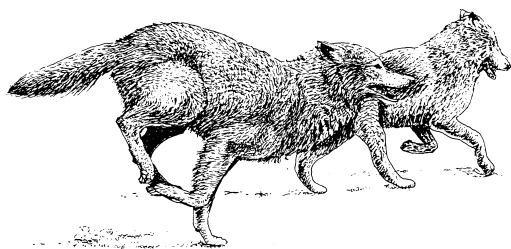
The objectives of the Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan call for a captive breeding program to re-establish a population of at least 100 Mexican wolves within its historical range. Through managed breeding, the captive population of Southwestern (Mexican) gray wolves has increased to 182 animals. A total of 43 animals have been released and 22 remained in the wild as of April, 2000. Additional releases are planned over the next two to three years until management goals are reached.

Northeastern Gray Wolf DPS

At this time, there is no conclusive evidence that wild gray wolves inhabit the northeastern U.S., although reports of wolves and wolf sign have been received. If this proposal is finalized, the Service will consider developing a recovery plan for the Northeastern DPS.

*Summary Continued;  
Special Rules*

Under the Endangered Species Act, we can implement special rules for threatened species that give greater management flexibility, if that flexibility promotes conservation of the animal or plant. This type of special rule is currently in effect in Minnesota, permitting designated government agents to trap and kill wolves that have preyed on domestic animals.



The Service is proposing to establish three new special rules. The implementation of a special rule for the Northeastern DPS would allow states and tribes to intentionally or incidentally “take” (harm, kill, harass) wolves if done in compliance with a Service-approved conservation plan.

In Michigan, Wisconsin, North Dakota and South Dakota a special rule would be similar to the existing special rule for Minnesota wolves, allowing designated government agents to kill wolves that have attacked domestic animals.

A special rule also would be established for the Western DPS. It would only apply to wolves outside of the experimental population areas, and would establish the conditions under which wolves may be harassed, relocated or killed to reduce conflicts with humans. Similar, but more restrictive conditions will continue to apply to wolves within the Rocky Mountain and Southwestern experimental population areas.

*Summary Continued;  
Evaluating Existing and  
Future Threats to  
Gray Wolves*

When we consider placing a plant or animal on the endangered species list, we examine five factors that may be contributing to the species’ imperilment:

- loss of habitat;
- overuse due to scientific or commercial factors;
- disease/predation;

- inadequacy of existing protections; and
- other human-caused or natural factors.

We will look at these same five factors before making a final decision to reclassify or delist gray wolves.

*Summary Continued;  
Public Comment and  
Information*

The Service is actively seeking information from the public on its proposal to delist and reclassify gray wolves. Specifically, the Service is interested in information on: future threats to wolf populations in the Lower 48 States and Mexico; the use of special rules to manage gray wolf populations; wolf monitoring methods; and other factors the Service should consider prior to making its final decision.

Comments from interested parties will be considered by the Service if received by November 13, 2000.

Send comments to:

Content Analysis Enterprise Team  
Wolf Comments  
200 East Broadway  
PO Box 7669, Room 301  
Missoula, Montana 59807

or send e-mail to: GRAYWOLFComments@FWS.GOV  
or fax comments to: 406-329-3021

Informal information meetings are planned across the country to provide details and answer questions on the Service's proposal. In addition, formal public hearings will also be held to receive verbal comments; additional hearings may be requested (deadline for receiving requests is August 28, 2000). The locations, dates, and times of informational meetings and hearings can be obtained by visiting the Service's Web site or by contacting us by phone or email as described below.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service posts information about gray wolf populations on the Internet at <http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf>. Individuals or groups wishing to be placed on the Service's mailing list to obtain updates on the wolf's status can write:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
Gray Wolf Questions  
1 Federal Drive  
Fort Snelling, MN 55111-4056

or use the GRAYWOLFMAIL@FWS.GOV address or call the Service's Gray Wolf Information Line at 612-713-7337.

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## Affect of Recent Minnesota Wolf Legislation; Second Proposal Will Likely be Developed

In May of 2000 the Minnesota Legislature passed, and the Governor signed, a set of regulations that describe the State protections that will begin after the species is removed from the Federal threatened and endangered species list. However, these regulations are not a wolf management plan; in fact, they direct the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to write a wolf management plan. The new regulations focus almost entirely on how wolves can be legally killed or harassed in Minnesota after Federal delisting. (See our summary at <http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf/>.) Thus, we still need to know more about how Minnesota DNR will manage wolves after delisting, especially regarding wolf population goals, habitat protection (e.g. den and rendezvous sites, dispersal corridor into Wisconsin), population and health monitoring, law enforcement funding and staffing, and public information and education. We're conferring with the Minnesota DNR on these issues. When we receive their complete response, we'll provide it and their new wolf regulations to the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Team and ask for the Team's evaluation of the future prospects for Minnesota wolves under that management scenario. After we get the Recovery Team's recommendation, we will decide whether to develop a proposal to DELIST gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes states, including Minnesota.



Conferring with the Minnesota DNR, the review by the Recovery Team, and our subsequent deliberations will likely take several months. Developing and publishing a DELISTING proposal would take at least several additional months. During that time we'll continue to move ahead with the separate wolf RECLASSIFICATION proposal that we developed last year, after the 1999 Minnesota Legislature failed to pass a wolf bill. That proposal recognizes that wolf populations have rapidly expanded in Wisconsin and Michigan and have surpassed the Federal recovery criteria, and that both states have completed wolf management plans. Because of the success of those recovery efforts, and the increasing incidents of wolves attacking livestock and dogs in those states, we believe a RECLASSIFICATION to THREATENED status, along with a special regulation that will allow government agents to kill wolves that kill or injure domestic animals, is now appropriate for Wisconsin and Michigan wolves.

This current RECLASSIFICATION proposal for Western Great Lakes wolves recommends NO CHANGE to the current "threatened" classification of Minnesota wolves. Instead we are proposing to bring all other Midwest wolves to the same level of Federal protection that Minnesota wolves have had for over 20 years, as the proposal also includes those dispersing wolves that move into North and South Dakota.

**Affect of Recent Minnesota Wolf Legislation (continued)**

If we get a favorable response from the Wolf Recovery Team regarding the future prospects for Minnesota wolves, we probably will begin work on a DELISTING proposal for all Western Great Lakes states wolves. We may even publish a DELISTING proposal before we make a final decision on the current RECLASSIFICATION proposal. The resulting chronological overlap of the two proposals would be a bit confusing, but they would be two separate proposals:

- 1) a RECLASSIFICATION proposal, based upon Midwest wolf recovery success as of mid-1999 and the failure of the Minnesota Legislature to pass a wolf plan that year, and
- 2) a DELISTING proposal, based upon continued Midwest wolf recovery in 2000 and the May 2000 passage of Minnesota wolf protection legislation and subsequent wolf management commitments made by the Minnesota DNR.

If we publish a second proposal, each proposal would have its own comment period, and separate final decisions would appear in the *Federal Register*.

**Update on Yellowstone Litigation**

On January 13, 2000, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the reintroduction of the gray wolf to the Greater Yellowstone Area and Idaho as being lawful actions under the Endangered Species Act. The Court's decision reversed the December 12, 1997 order by the U.S. District Court in Wyoming. That earlier court order had found the reintroductions to be illegal, due to the possibility that fully protected endangered wolves could wander into the reintroduction areas and lose some of their protections. The subsequent ruling of the Tenth Circuit Court removes the District Court's order (stayed pending appeal) that the introduced wolves and their offspring must be removed.





**Current Population  
Numbers  
(1999/2000 Surveys)**

Eastern Gray Wolf  
Michigan - Upper Peninsula 216  
- Isle Royale 29  
Minnesota (1998 estimate\*) 2445  
Wisconsin about 250

\*Minnesota does not conduct an annual survey.

Northern Rocky Mountain Gray Wolf  
Northwest Montana 63

Northern Rocky Mountain Gray Wolf - Experimental Populations  
Central Idaho 141  
Yellowstone (Idaho/Wyoming/Montana) 118

Mexican Gray Wolf - Experimental Population  
Arizona & New Mexico 43 - released  
22 - current (4/00)



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