



Wolf Tracks



A Summary of Gray Wolf Activities and Issues

March, 2002

Introduction

This is the seventh issue of “Wolf Tracks”, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s update on gray wolf activities and information. This issue focuses on our recent decision to reclassify gray wolves from endangered to threatened in portions of the United States and to delist wolves in areas outside their historical range. For more information, please contact our Gray Wolf Line at 612-713-7337 or at graywolfmail@fws.gov. “Wolf Tracks” and much more information on gray wolves is available on the Web at <http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf>.

Summary of the Gray Wolf Reclassification Final Rule

Since first listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1974, recovery programs have helped gray wolf populations rebound from the lows experienced during the mid-1900s. Today, wolf recovery has almost been achieved in the Eastern United States. In the West, reintroduced gray wolves in Wyoming and Idaho complement a naturally recovering population in northwestern Montana.



As a result of these successes, we changed the ESA designation of the gray wolf in most of the lower 48 states to reflect the species’ current population status. We proposed the change in July 2000, and have now finalized it, but in a form modified from the original proposal. Our final decision, recently published in the Federal Register, 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 Federal Register publication of the final reclassification of the gray wolf is available on the Web at <http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf>, by calling the Service’s Gray Wolf Information Line at 612-713-7337., or by emailing us at graywolfmail@fws.gov.

Summary; *Establishing Separate Listings for Each Recovery Program*

We operate three separate recovery programs for the gray wolf; each has its own recovery plan and recovery goals based on the unique characteristics and limitations of its geographic area. These three recovery programs have progressed at different speeds and have achieved different degrees of success. It is no longer appropriate to classify all of these wolf populations as “endangered” because two of them are no longer on the brink of extinction. The ESA provides that species can be reclassified from endangered to threatened as they approach recovery and the strictest protections are no longer necessary or appropriate.

Formerly, the gray wolf was listed as endangered across the 48 states and Mexico, except in Minnesota where it was listed as threatened. The final reclassification rule replaces that listing with three separate smaller listings. Those listings have been designated as Distinct Population Segments (DPSs) under the Endangered Species Act. In total, the three DPSs cover all the area that we believe was historically occupied by the gray wolf. Each DPS contains one of our gray wolf recovery programs in its core, as well as an adjacent area where wolves are not currently found, except possibly as occasional dispersing individuals. The protection given to each of these areas varies with the health of the wolf population there.

The **Eastern Gray Wolf DPS** encompasses the historical range of the gray wolf from the Great Plains to the Atlantic Coast. Due to the successful gray wolf recovery in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, this DPS is now classified as **threatened**.



The **Western Gray Wolf DPS** primarily includes the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific coastal states. In the Northern U.S. Rockies, wolf recovery efforts have also been successful to the point that we have reclassified this DPS to **threatened**.

The **Southwestern Gray Wolf DPS** includes Arizona and New Mexico, southern Colorado and southern Utah, western Oklahoma, western Texas, and Mexico. Our efforts to reintroduce Mexican gray wolves in the southwest are still in the early stage. Wolf numbers are low, threats appear relatively high, and recovery is many years in the future. Therefore, the Southwestern DPS retains a classification of **endangered**. The special regulation for the nonessential experimental population designation for wolves in parts of Arizona, Mexico, and Texas is unchanged by this final rule.

The Southeastern and Mid-Atlantic portions of the U.S. are outside of the historical range of the gray wolf. Although these areas were included in the 1978 listing of the gray wolf, their

inclusion was in error. These areas are now “**delisted**” – they are no longer included in any of the ESA’s protections for the gray wolf. However, the red wolf, a separate wolf species, is still listed as endangered in the Southeast and is not affected by any of these changes.

Summary; *Maintaining the Nonessential Experimental Population Designations in the Northern Rockies*

In 1994, we finalized special regulations under section 10(j) of the Act to designate two areas in the northern U.S. Rocky Mountains as “nonessential experimental populations” (NEP) to use these areas for reintroducing gray wolves. (“Nonessential” refers to our determination that these populations are not essential to the survival of the gray wolf.) These areas include all of Wyoming, most of Idaho, and the southern half of Montana. The NEP designations, as well as the special regulations that apply to the two NEPs, are not affected by this final rule, and they will continue to apply to gray wolves in the NEPs.

Summary; *Special Regulations for the Western DPS and the Eastern DPS*

The ESA provides for threatened species to receive less Federal protection than endangered species, if that is appropriate for their continued recovery. Because threatened species generally are more numerous, protection efforts may focus more on ensuring the continued growth of the population, rather than on protecting every individual. Section 4(d) of the ESA allows us to modify protections for threatened species so that we can better address their unique conservation needs.

In the case of the gray wolf, one of those unique needs is to reduce the conflicts that arise between wolves and people who own domestic animals, including pets and livestock. Due to differences in livestock raising practices across wolf range, we have developed two different special regulations under section 4(d) to reduce wolf-domestic animal conflicts without unnecessarily impacting continued wolf recovery.



The special regulation for **most of the Eastern DPS** focuses on removing wolves that have been verified as having attacked or killed domestic animals. It provides States and Tribes with the authority to kill such wolves without the need to obtain a Federal permit. This part of the special regulation is very similar to the regulation that has authorized lethal control of depredating wolves in Minnesota since 1978. The new special regulation also provides Tribes with the authority to salvage dead wolves for traditional cultural uses without a Federal permit. This new regulation applies to the part of the Eastern DPS that is west of Pennsylvania; however, it does not include Minnesota (see next section).

Summary; *Special Regulations for the Western DPS and the Eastern DPS (continued)*

The new special regulation for the **Western DPS** is very similar to the regulations that continue to cover the nonessential experimental population areas in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. It allows a variety of methods to reduce wolf-domestic animal conflicts, depending on the severity and frequency of the conflicts, and whether they occur on private or public land. Many of these methods are now available to livestock and dog owners. Other methods can be carried out by the Service or by other Federal, State, or Tribal agencies that we designate for such purposes.

Because these two new special regulations are closely based on the existing special regulations that have been successfully used for Minnesota wolves and wolves within the northern Rockies NEPs, we expect them to reduce wolf-domestic animal conflicts while allowing core wolf populations to continue to increase.

Summary; *No Changes for Minnesota Wolves or for Critical Habitat in Minnesota and Michigan*

Gray wolves in Minnesota were reclassified from endangered to threatened in 1978. At that time, we established a special regulation under section 4(d) of the ESA to allow lethal control of Minnesota wolves that have preyed on domestic animals. The special regulation applies to about 88 percent of the State. That special regulation has succeeded in reducing the impact of wolf recovery on livestock producers in Minnesota while allowing the State's wolf population to increase in numbers and expand its range.

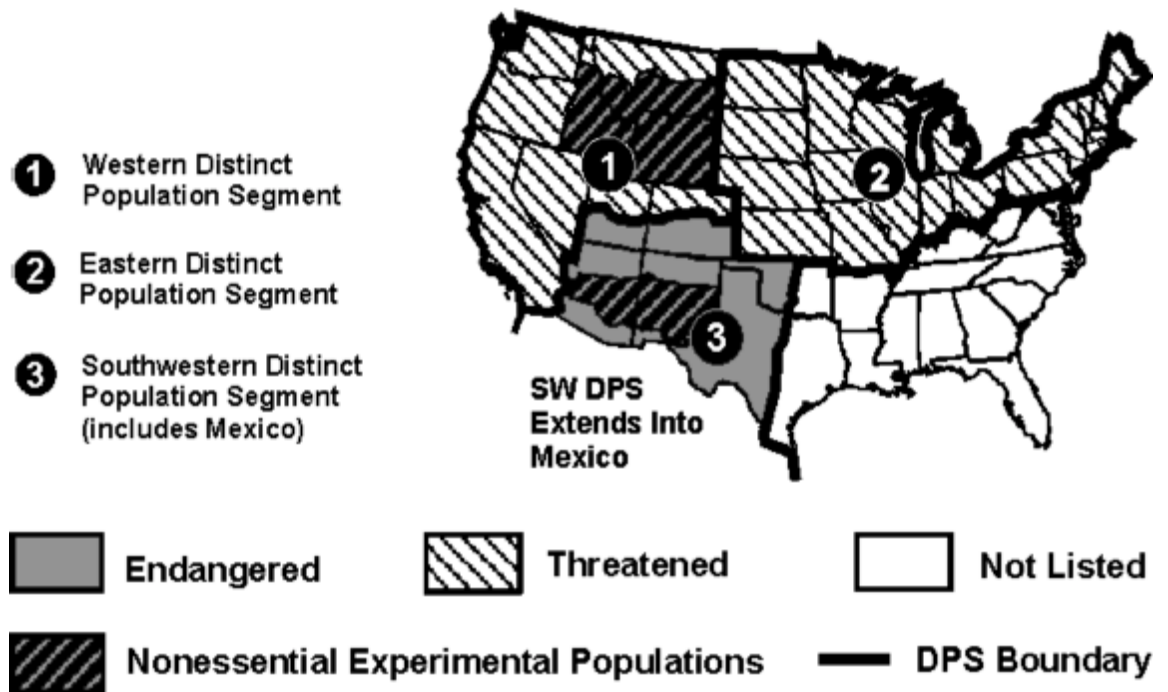


The final reclassification rule does not affect the previously established Federal protections afforded to gray wolves in Minnesota. Minnesota wolves remain threatened under the ESA; the Minnesota section 4(d) rule continues to be in effect; and the three areas designated as critical habitat in Minnesota (as well as the fourth critical habitat area on Isle Royale, Michigan) are unchanged.

Summary; *No Changes for Gray Wolves in the Southwestern Distinct Population Segment*

The final rule does not affect the status or management of gray wolves in the southwest. Gray wolves in the Southwestern DPS retain their endangered status and the nonessential experimental population area in Arizona, New Mexico, and a portion of Texas remains unchanged.

Status of the Gray Wolf in the Continental U.S.



Changes from the Proposed Rule to the Final Rule

The final rule was modified from our original proposal. The modifications are listed below.

- Listing three instead of four DPSs - Our July 2000 proposal included four DPSs, while the final rule lists only three. We combined the proposed Western Great Lakes DPS and the proposed Northeastern DPS into a single Eastern DPS because there is no firm evidence that a wolf population exists in the Northeastern U.S. and there is now uncertainty about the identify of the wolf species that was historically found there.
- The boundary between the Western DPS and the Southwestern DPS has been moved northward into Colorado and Utah to better reflect the possible movements of dispersing wolves from the Southwest and the Northern Rocky Mountains.
- Reduction in the area that is delisted - The proposal recommended delisting in parts or all of 30 states,

Changes from the Proposed Rule to the Final Rule *(continued)*

whereas the final rule delisted all or parts of 16 states. States that are outside the historical range were delisted, while all states within the historical range of the gray wolf are now included in one of the remaining listed areas.

- The special regulation for the Western DPS covers California and Nevada; these states were proposed to be delisted, so the special regulation was not proposed to apply there.
- The special regulation for the proposed Western Great Lakes DPS applies to most of the larger Eastern DPS. Specifically, those parts of the DPS west of Pennsylvania, and excluding Minnesota, are covered by the new special regulation.
- Minor changes have been made to the conditions under which several aspects of the Western DPS special regulation can be applied.

When does the final reclassification decision become effective?

The reclassification and the associated special regulations for the Eastern and Western DPSs became effective immediately upon publication in the *Federal Register* on April 1, 2003. Because we are not increasing Federal protections or regulatory oversight, there is no need to provide time for the public and government agencies to come into compliance with any changes. The immediate application of the reclassification also makes it easier for individuals to deal with wolf-livestock conflicts.

How did the Service make its final decision to change the gray wolf's status?

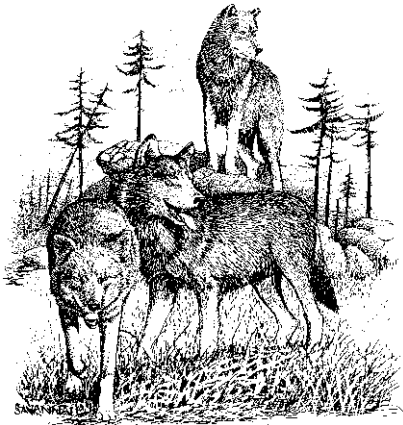
When we proposed to change the gray wolf's legal status in 2000, we held a series of public information meetings, as well as 14 public hearings throughout the country. During the 120-day public comment period, the Service received about 17,000 unique comments on the proposal to change the wolf's status. We examined all public comments, evaluated current information about the status of the gray wolf, and then made the decision to reclassify gray wolves in much of the lower 48 states from endangered to threatened with modifications to the original proposal in response to our analysis of the public comments.

Will recovery activities be expanded to all states within the DPSs?

A DPS is a listed entity, like a species or subspecies listing; it is not a recovery program. While each DPS corresponds to a core wolf recovery area, the DPS boundaries include all areas where wolves once occurred. The recovery programs for gray wolves in the United States have been directed by recovery plans that were prepared for the eastern, northern Rocky Mountain, and southwestern wolf populations. Those recovery plans call for restoration of wolf populations to a point that they no longer need protection of the ESA; the ESA does not require, nor do these plans call for restoring wolves to their entire former range or to all remaining suitable habitat.

Thus, the recovery plan for the wolves in the eastern U.S. specifies that wolves must be recovered in Minnesota and in one other place in its historical range in the East. This second population now exists in Wisconsin and Michigan. Once those recovery goals are met, the gray wolf will be considered recovered in the eastern United States even if the species does not occupy its entire former range. Similarly in the West, once recovery goals have been met in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, wolves in the Western DPS will be considered recovered. At this time we are not planning to initiate additional gray wolf recovery programs or geographically expand the area included in any of our three existing gray wolf recovery programs.

Future Changes in Federal Protection for Gray Wolves



Now that we have finalized the reclassification of gray wolves in areas where they are no longer endangered, we can begin the review and evaluation process to delist wolves – taking them off the list of endangered and threatened species – if appropriate. Such a step is possible when wolf numbers reach numerical goals and when states with core wolf populations provide adequate assurances that those populations will be protected after the ESA's protections are removed. In the Eastern DPS, wolf numbers have reached and exceeded recovery goals, and the Service has received completed state wolf management plans from Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota. In the Western DPS, numerical recovery goals were achieved in 2002 and state management plans are being developed.

In two separate Federal Register advanced notices published concurrently with the final reclassification rule, we announced our intention to propose removing the Eastern DPS, the Western DPS, and all nonessential experimental population designations in the northern U.S. Rocky Mountains from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife in the near future. Neither of those proposals will affect gray wolves in the Southwestern DPS or the nonessential experimental population there.

Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2002 Annual Report

The Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2002 Annual Report is available on-line at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/wolf/annualreports.htm> or by contacting the Helena, Montana office (406-449-5225). The annual report, a cooperative effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Nez Perce Tribe, the National Park Service, and U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services, presents information on the status, distribution, and management of the recovering Rocky Mountain wolf population from January 1, 2002, through December 31, 2002.

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