Wolf Tracks

A Summary of Gray Wolf Conservation Activities and Issues in the Eastern United States

July 2004

On July 21, 2004, we published a proposal to remove the Gray Wolf Eastern Distinct Population Segment from the list of threatened and endangered species. Below is the summary of that proposal, which is now available for public review and comment. The complete proposal as well as information about wolf numbers, conservation, and biology are on our website at http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf.

Summary of the Proposal to Delist the Gray Wolf Eastern DPS

Since the gray wolf was first listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1974, recovery programs have helped populations of this species rebound from the lows experienced during the middle of the 20th Century. Today, gray wolves are no longer at risk of extinction in the eastern half of the United States. As a result of this success, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to delist the Gray Wolf Eastern Distinct Population Segment under the ESA process.

Managing wolf populations in the United States

In 2003, the Service designated three gray wolf distinct population segments (DPS) in the lower 48 States: the Eastern, the Western and the Southwestern. At that time, wolves in the Eastern and Western DPSs were reclassified from endangered to threatened; those in the Southwest remained endangered.

We designated those three DPSs because the Service operates 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.

The Service's current proposal, if finalized, would remove gray wolves in the Eastern DPS from the Federal list of endangered and threatened species because gray wolves in this DPS have recovered. The proposal also would remove critical habitat for the gray wolf in Michigan and Minnesota, and eliminate special rules for wolf management in the Eastern DPS, as they are no longer needed. The Service's proposal does not affect gray wolves in the West or in the Southwest, nor does it affect red wolves, a separate species found in the Southeast.

Wolf Recovery in the Eastern DPS

The Eastern Gray Wolf DPS encompasses the historical range of the gray wolf from the Dakotas, Kansas and Nebraska to the East Coast of the United States. The southern boundary includes the states of Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey and the northern boundary of the DPS is the Canadian border. Recovery of gray wolves in this DPS is the result of healthy populations and beneficial management by the States, Tribes, and Federal agencies in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

The original Recovery Plan for the Eastern Timber Wolf and the 1992 revision of that plan established criteria to identify the point at which long-term population viability would be assured in the eastern United States. To achieve recovery, the plan called for maintaining and expanding the Minnesota wolf population and establishing at least one other gray wolf population in the East. According to the plan, this second population needed to sustain at least 100 animals for five consecutive years if located within 100 miles of the Minnesota population. If the second population was more than 100 miles away, it needed to support at least 200 animals for five consecutive years.

These recovery criteria have been met and exceeded. The Minnesota population has steadily expanded; the latest count in 1998 found a minimum of 2,450 animals and data collected since then do not indicate a significant change. An additional population is well-established in Michigan and Wisconsin, with numbers there of 360 and 373 respectively. Wolf numbers in those two states have exceeded 100 for the past 11 years.

Threats Analysis

The other major requirement to achieve recovery in the Eastern DPS is to have protections in place to ensure the continued survival of the wolf population in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan if the DPS is delisted. To prepare for assuming management of the species after Federal delisting, each of those States developed a wolf management plan with the goal of ensuring future survival of the State's wolf population. Those plans were signed by the head of the State's Department of Natural Resources after input from wolf experts and extensive public involvement.

In our proposal to delist the Eastern DPS of the gray wolf, we evaluated current and future threats to the species. These threats are spelled out by the ESA. They include loss or modification of habitat, overutilization for commercial or other purposes, disease or predation, inadequacy of existing laws or regulations (other than the ESA), and other natural or human-caused threats. If gray wolves in the Eastern DPS are delisted, the States and Tribes will be responsible for their management. The degree to which future wolf populations in the Eastern DPS would face these threats depends mainly on how the States and Tribes plan to manage their wolves after delisting. Therefore, the Service evaluated the Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin wolf management plans accordingly and found that the plans would adequately protect wolves and would ensure their existence in the Eastern DPS for the foreseeable future. The Service also contacted Midwestern Tribes to obtain information on their likely protection and management of wolves after delisting.

Management by States

State management plans that ensure long-term survival of the gray wolf are essential because, if the Service's proposal to delist is finalized, States (and Tribes, as described below) would be responsible for conservation and management of the species. Those management plans describe how the States will ensure that the gray wolf populations survive.

In 2001, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources completed its comprehensive wolf management plan, which is based, in part, on the recommendations of a wolf management roundtable and on a State wolf management law passed in 2000. The plan establishes a minimum goal of 1,600 wolves in the State and includes provisions for population monitoring and management, management of problem wolves, management of wolf habitat and prey, enforcement of laws prohibiting take of wolves, public education, and increased staffing for wolf management and research. The plan divides the State into wolf management zones A and B, which correspond to zones 1-4 and zone 5, respectively, in the Federal wolf recovery plan. In Zone A, where over 80 percent of the wolves reside, State protections would be nearly as strict as current protections under the ESA, and we expect little or no resulting post-delisting population decline there. The protection provided by the plan to the Zone A wolves will ensure a State wolf population well above 1,600 in that zone. In Zone B, wolves could be killed to protect domestic animals, even if attacks or threatening behavior have not occurred. While a significant decrease in the Zone B wolf population may result, such a result would be consistent with the Federal recovery plan, which discourages the establishment of a wolf population in that portion of the state.

The Wisconsin wolf management plan has a goal of 350 wolves. It allows for different levels of management within four separate zones. The two zones which now contain most of the state's wolves would be managed to allow limited lethal control of problem wolves – when the population is greater than 250 – but in general, lethal control wouldn't be practiced on large blocks of public land. In the other two zones, which have limited habitat, control would be less restricted for problem wolves.

Management by States (continued)

The Wisconsin plan also calls for monitoring, education, reimbursement for depredation losses, habitat management, coordination with Tribes, and development of new legal protections. If the population exceeds 350, a proactive depredation control program would be allowed in all four zones and public harvest would be considered. Because the wolf population now exceeds this level, the State has taken initial steps to delist the wolf and classify it as a Protected Wild Animal. If numbers decline and stay below 250 for three years, the State will relist as threatened. If they decline to less than 80 for one year, the State will relist or reclassify the wolf as endangered.

Under the Michigan wolf management plan, wolves would be considered recovered in Michigan when a minimum sustainable population of 200 wolves is maintained for five consecutive years. The Upper Peninsula has had more than 200 wolves since the year 2000. That means that the gray wolf is eligible for state delisting once it is federally delisted. Following Federal delisting, the State intends to reclassify Michigan wolves to protected animal status and will develop regulations to regulate take and establish the conditions in which lethal depredation control can be carried out by Michigan Department of Natural Resources personnel.

Management by Tribes

Although the Tribes with wolves that visit or reside on their Reservations do not yet have management plans specific to the gray wolf, many tribes and multi-tribal organizations have indicated to us that they will continue to conserve wolves on Native American reservations in the western Great Lakes area. Upon request, we are working with the Tribes to develop wolf management plans for the reservations.

Post-Delisting Monitoring

The ESA requires that when the Service delists a species it is monitored for at least five years. If the species declines after delisting, the Service can begin the process to return it to the endangered and threatened species list, if appropriate. Most monitoring plans focus on the species' population size, distribution, and productivity; threats to the species; and any legal or management needs that might be necessary to reduce threats.

A monitoring plan is under development for the gray wolf in the Eastern DPS and includes monitoring for five years in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Assisting the Service in developing the plan are members of the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Team. During the monitoring period, if the Service detects a change in wolf populations or a significant increase in threats, it can evaluate and change monitoring methods or consider relisting. At the end of the monitoring period, the Service will decide whether to relist, continue monitoring, or end monitoring.

Public Comments

The Service's proposal to delist the Gray Wolf Eastern DPS was published in the *Federal Register* on July 21, 2004. The public is invited to comment on the proposal; the Service will consider all comments received no later than November 18, 2004. Comments may be submitted by e-mail to egwdelist@fs.fed.us or by sending a letter to Gray Wolf Delist – Eastern Distinct Population Segment, c/o Content Analysis Team, P.O. Box 221150, Salt Lake City, Utah 84122-1150 or by sending a fax to (801)517-1015 or through the Federal eRulemaking Portal: http://www.regulations.gov.

In the event that our internet connection is not functional, please submit your comments by mail or fax.

The Service will also hold public hearings within the Eastern DPS to gather public input. We are in the process of scheduling those hearings and will announce the dates, times, and locations as soon as the arrangements are made.

More information on the proposal and public hearings can be found on the Service's Midwest website at http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf

Once the comment period has closed, the Service will review all comments and new information and make a decision on whether to finalize the proposal to delist the Gray Wolf Eastern DPS.

Additional Information

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service posts information about the Gray Wolf Eastern DPS 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 status of the Gray Wolf Eastern DPS can write to:

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

You may also use the GRAYWOLFMAIL@FWS.GOV address or call the Service's Gray Wolf Information Line at 612-713-7337. This phone line is for information requests only; comments on the proposal made by phone will not be accepted.

In the event that our internet connection is not functional, please request additional information by mail, e:mail, phone, or fax.

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