



Wolf Recovery under the Endangered Species Act

Before the arrival of European settlers, wolves ranged widely across the continent, from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico. Two species are found in North America, the gray wolf, with its various subspecies, and the red wolf, found in the southeastern United States.

Wolves play an important role as predators in the ecosystems they inhabit. They feed primarily on large mammals, such as deer and elk, removing sick and injured animals from the populations. Wolves are highly social, living in packs and hunting and raising young cooperatively.

As the country was settled, native prey species declined and the number of domestic animals increased. As wolves increasingly turned to livestock for prey, government agencies and private citizens undertook large-scale predator control programs, with wolves hunted nearly to extinction.

By the middle of the 20th century, few wolves existed in the lower 48 States. Only several hundred gray wolves in Minnesota and an isolated population on Michigan's Isle Royale remained, along with an occasional Mexican wolf—and reports of a few red wolves.

In cooperation with species experts and knowledgeable staff from State wildlife agencies, other Federal agencies, universities, and conservation organizations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed gray wolf recovery plans for several parts of the country. The goal was to restore the species to a secure status in the wild as a functioning member of its ecosystem in several representative areas of its historical range.

Recovery plans identify objective and measurable criteria to indicate that the threats to the species have been reduced. Many plans use population levels and distribution of a species to indicate whether threats have been reduced and thus the species is recovered. These “recovery criteria” differ among wolf recovery programs depending on the threats to the species,



Photo by Gary Kramery/USFWS

habitat conditions, the connectivity of the populations, and local ecological circumstances. The Service can move forward with reviewing the status of the species once the criteria outlined in the recovery plan have been met. Once the species is delisted, the Endangered Species Act's protections are removed and management is returned to States and Tribes.

Today, more than 5,000 gray wolves live in the lower 48 States thanks to protection from unregulated hunting and trapping provided by the Act, improved habitat for prey, and recovery programs. The wolf population in the western Great Lakes States of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan has recovered to a point that it no

longer needs the protection of the Act. Gray wolf populations in the northern Rocky Mountains are protected under the Act as either endangered or “nonessential, experimental populations.” The area in Arizona and New Mexico where Mexican gray wolves have been reintroduced is also designated as a “nonessential, experimental population.” That designation provides management flexibility for reintroduced populations.

Wolves in the Western Great Lakes States

At the time of its listing under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the gray wolf in the eastern part of the United States had been eliminated from the landscape, except in northern

Minnesota and on Isle Royale, Michigan. Protection under the Act has allowed the Minnesota population to grow, and now about 3,000 wolves live there. In addition, wolves returned to Michigan's Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin. About 900 animals live there.

Because the threats to the wolf populations in these States have been reduced as outlined in the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Plan, the Service removed the protection of the Act in early 2007. States and Tribes now manage wolves in this region.

Wolves in the Rocky Mountains

Probably the best-known wolf recovery effort was the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996. After an absence of more than 50 years, the Service brought wild gray wolves from Canada to the Park and to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area in Idaho. The goal was to speed up recovery in the Rocky Mountain region and restore a species to the historic range from which it had been eliminated in the late 1920s.

Recovery partners released wolves as family groups in Yellowstone and individually in central Idaho. The program has been extremely successful. Wolves in both areas have formed packs and reproduced. Now Yellowstone is home to about 371 wolves. About 713 wolves live in central Idaho. Coupled with natural recovery in northwestern Montana—where there are now about 159 wolves—the reintroduction program has boosted recovery progress in the Rocky Mountain region.

Mexican Gray Wolves

Mexican gray wolves, called Mexican wolves or lobos, were once common through western Texas, southern New Mexico, central Arizona, and northern Mexico. By the early 1900s, growing numbers, of livestock in the region and fewer natural prey species resulted in increasing numbers of livestock losses. Intensive control efforts were largely responsible for eradicating Mexican wolves by the middle of this century. The last confirmed wild Mexican wolf was reported in the United States in 1970 and in Mexico in 1980.

Mexican wolves were listed as endangered in 1976, and a joint recovery effort with Mexico began. Using animals captured in Mexico in

1977, recovery partners established a captive breeding population. These animals are the foundation of the recovery effort. Wolves that are candidates for reintroduction undergo a “pre-acclimation” period at Sevilleta National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico and other remote facilities. This practice helps foster behavior and characteristics that enhance their ability to survive in the wild.

In 1998, the Service released 13 captive-reared Mexican wolves in eastern Arizona. Two years later, the first Mexican wolf pup was conceived and born in the wild! Additional releases from progeny of the 300 wolves in captivity are planned to reach the goal of a wild population of 100 animals.

Wolves in Alaska and Canada

Gray wolves in Alaska and Canada have never reached the point that protection under the Endangered Species Act is necessary. In Alaska, the State manages wolves—about 6,000 to 7,000 animals. Similarly, provincial governments manage Canada's 50,000 to 60,000 wolves. The species is not considered endangered or threatened.

Red Wolves

Red wolves once ranged throughout the southeastern United States up the eastern seaboard towards New England. As with gray wolves, concern about conflict between red wolves and human activities resulted in eradication efforts. As red wolf numbers declined, the remaining animals in the wild were removed to zoos and other facilities to save the species. By 1980, the red wolf existed only in captivity, with a founder population of 14 animals!

Captive breeding efforts are proving to be successful. Reintroduction is continuing at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge in North Carolina. Red wolves have returned to the wild.

In northeastern North Carolina about 100 red wolves comprise 20 packs the wild. Captive breeding efforts at nearly 40 facilities throughout the United States have about 170 wolves. The captive rearing program is vital to maximizing the genetic diversity of the species and provides animals for occasional release into the wild. Recovery goals are 550 red wolves, including at least 220 in the wild.

Number of Gray Wolves in the Continental United States in 2006

Western Great Lakes States

Michigan	434*
Minnesota	3,020
Wisconsin	465

*not including Isle Royale's 30 wolves

Western States

Yellowstone	371
Northwest Montana	159
Central Idaho	713
Arizona/New Mexico (Mexican Wolf)	59

For more information about the status of wolves, contact one of the Service offices listed below or our homepage at www.fws.gov.

Midwestern Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1 Federal Drive
Ft. Snelling, Minnesota 55111

Rocky Mountain Region
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
585 Shepard Way,
Helena, Montana 59601

Mexican Wolves
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 1306
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103

Red Wolf Recovery Program
c/o Alligator River National Wildlife
Refuge
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
708 North Highway 64
Manteo, North Carolina 27954

February 2007