

United States Department of the Interior



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To: Regional Director, Region 6, Denver, CO

From: Wolf Recovery Coordinator for the NRM DPS, Helena, Montana

Subject: Service review of the 2009 wolf population in the NRM DPS

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In the 2009 rule to delist wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains (NRM) Distinct Population Segment (DPS), except Wyoming, (74 FR 151123, April 2, 2009) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) committed to monitor the status of the NRM DPS wolf population and any potential threats to it for at least 5-years post-delisting and make that review available for public inspection. We reviewed the Interagency Annual Report for 2009 to make this analysis and determination (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nez Perce Tribe, National Park Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Blackfeet Nation, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Idaho Fish and Game, and USDA Wildlife Services. 2010. Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2009 Interagency Annual Report. C.A. Sime and E. E. Bangs, eds. USFWS, Ecological Services, 585 Shepard Way, Helena, Montana. 59601, <http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov>). This memorandum constitutes the Service review of the status of the 2009 wolf population in the NRM DPS and our determination of any possible threats to it (Service et al. 2010).

NRM Wolf Population- The NRM wolf population increased in 2009. On December 31, 2009 the gray wolf population in the Northern Rocky Mountain (NRM) Distinct Population Segment (DPS) (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of northcentral Utah) was estimated to have at least 1,706 wolves in 242 wolf packs, and 115 breeding pairs, more than were estimated in 2008 (1,645 wolves; 217 packs; and 95 breeding pairs respectively). The overall distribution of the NRM wolf packs also increased (Figure 1). At the end of 2009 we estimated there were at least 319 wolves in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area (NWMT), 455 in the Greater Yellowstone Recovery Area (GYA), and 913 in the Central Idaho Recovery Area CID)(Figure 1, Table 4a). Within the NRM DPS by state boundaries, there were an estimated minimum of 524 wolves in Montana, 320 in Wyoming, 843 in Idaho (Table 4b). Five wolves were in eastern Washington and 14 in eastern Oregon (Tables

6 & 7). Of approximately 242 packs (groups of 2 or more wolves with territories persisting until Dec. 31, 2009), 115 packs met the definition of “breeding pair,” (packs containing at least one adult male and one adult female and 2 or more pups on December 31) (Tables 4a, 4b). Minimum recovery goals (an equitably distributed NRM wolf population that never goes below 100 wolves and 10 breeding pairs in Montana, in Idaho, and in Wyoming and is managed to consistently maintain over 150 wolves and 15 breeding pairs per state) have been exceeded in the NRM DPS every year since 2002 (Table 4b). Wolves in the NRM DPS, except in Wyoming, were delisted in 2009. As the wolf population expands our minimum estimate becomes less accurate because our field efforts have been relatively stable for the past few years. However, our estimate of the NRM wolf population it is still a very accurate compared to most estimates of wildlife population density and distribution in North America.

Human-caused Wolf Mortality by State and Cause- We had previously determined that only excessive levels of human-caused mortality could possibly threaten the wolf population in the NRM DPS (74 FR 15166, Adequacy of Regulatory Mechanisms within the NRM DPS). Montana had the highest rate of known human-caused mortality on wolves and Wyoming the lowest in 2009. Agency control (145) and hunting (72) removed 28% of the minimum estimated wolf population in Montana. In Idaho, hunting (134) and control (93) removed 20% of the minimum estimated wolf population. In Wyoming 9% of the minimum wolf population was removed by agency control (32). Wolf hunting was not allowed in Wyoming, Washington, Oregon, or Utah. In addition, past research on radio-collared wolves from 1984-2004 indicated roughly 26 out of every 100 adult-sized wolves died annually. On average about 10 of them were killed by agency control, 10 by illegal killing, 3 were killed accidentally by people (mainly vehicle collisions) and 3 by natural causes (mainly wolf-to-wolf conflict and disease/parasites). Despite the levels of human-caused and other forms of mortality documented in 2009, the wolf population increased, proving human-caused mortality was adequately regulated.

Wolf Population Recovery- By every biological measure the NRM wolf population is fully recovered. Resident packs now appear to saturate suitable habitat in the core recovery areas and dispersing wolves routinely travel between them and successfully breed. Consequently, genetic diversity in the NRM remains very high. The 3 subpopulations function as a single large NRM metapopulation (Figure 1). Lone dispersing wolves have also traveled beyond the core recovery areas and some of them have bred. Others have gone into most adjacent states. Numerous research projects are underway examining: wolf population dynamics, predator-prey interactions, wolf interactions with other wildlife species, wolf diseases and parasites, wolf population genetics, possible wolf-caused trophic cascades, and livestock depredation by wolves. Biological restoration of wolves to the NRM was maintained. Numerous scientific papers were published about wolves in the NRM. State, tribal, and others are in preparation. USFWS, state and tribal management maintained a fully recovered wolf population in the NRM DPS.

Conclusion: The status (as demonstrated by increased pack distribution and numbers of wolves, packs, and breeding pairs in 2009 compared to any previous year) of the wolf population in the NRM DPS exceeds recovery levels. Dispersal and breeding by wolves traveling between the recovery areas was documented in 2009 further proving the meta-population structure of the NRM

is being maintained solely by natural dispersal. No threats were identified (A. The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range; B) Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; C) Disease or Predation; D) Adequacy or inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; E) Other natural or man-made factors affecting its continued existence (including but not limited to- public attitudes, genetic considerations; climate change; catastrophic events; and impacts to wolf social structure) that could threaten the wolf population in the NRM DPS in the foreseeable future. Delisting has not threatened the NRM wolf population nor increased threats to it.

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