

Wolverine Distinct Population Segment Candidate Species Status Questions and Answers

What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's determination regarding the status of the wolverine Distinct Population Segment?

After evaluating all the available scientific and commercial information regarding the wolverine in the contiguous United States, including an analysis of the threats to the species and its habitat, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is warranted. However, listing the wolverine Distinct Population Segment (DPS) at this time is precluded by the need to address other listings of higher priority.

The wolverine will be added to the list of candidate species under the ESA and will be proposed for listing when funding and workload priorities for other listing actions allow.

If the Service proposes the wolverine DPS for listing in the future, the public will have an opportunity to comment.

As a candidate species, the wolverine DPS will not have federal protection and will remain a state-managed species.

Why did the Service make this decision?

New scientific information produced by the University of Washington Climate Impacts Group and the U.S. Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station indicates future climate changes will likely reduce wolverine habitat extent and distribution. This habitat reduction is expected to result in reduced numbers of wolverines and reduced connectivity among wolverine populations to the point where maintenance of the wolverine population in the contiguous United States is unlikely.

Other factors may have smaller impacts on wolverines at local scales, and considered cumulatively with climate change, may constitute threats to the wolverine. These secondary factors include wolverine harvest in Montana, dispersed recreational use such as backcountry skiing, snowmobiling, off-road motorized use, infrastructure development, and transportation corridors. Some of the secondary threats above require further research to verify impacts to wolverines and possible mitigation of those impacts. The Service expects that federal land management agencies will address these potential impacts as scientific information becomes available that will enable an appropriate response.

The Service concludes that because of the projected impact of climate change on wolverine habitat, the wolverine DPS and its habitat should be protected under the ESA.

What is a candidate species?

Candidate species are plants and animals for which the Service has sufficient information on their biological status and threats to propose them for listing as endangered or threatened under the ESA, but for which development of a proposed listing regulation is precluded by higher priority listing actions to address species in greater need.

Candidate species receive no statutory protection under the ESA, but the Service encourages voluntary cooperative conservation efforts for these species because they are, by definition, species that warrant future protection under the ESA.

What is being done to conserve wolverines in the contiguous U.S.?

Wolverines are provided protection from some threats by state protective designations. Wolverine are considered state-endangered or state-threatened in Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and California. In these states, endangered or threatened designations make it illegal to kill or otherwise harm wolverines. They are protected from harvest in Idaho, Wyoming, and Nevada. There is no open harvest season in Utah. Montana is currently the only state in which wolverine harvest is legal. In Montana, wolverine is managed as a furbearing species with a tightly regulated harvest that avoids being concentrated in any particular geographic area.

Now that the Service has designated the wolverine DPS as a "candidate," what will happen next?

When a species becomes a candidate it is given a "listing priority number" (LPN). This number is given because there are not enough Service personnel, time, or money to propose all the candidate species for listing. The purpose of the LPN is to ensure the species in the most trouble are given the highest priority. The Service's listing process works from the highest priority LPNs (1) down to lowest (12) to fund listing actions.

The Service has assigned an LPN of 6 to the wolverine DPS, which places it near the middle of the Service's nationwide listing priorities.

It is difficult to predict how long it might be before the Service is able to prepare a proposed rule for the wolverine and it will depend on the number of species with greater and more imminent threats (i.e., higher LPNs) and funding available. While the wolverine is a candidate, the Service will review its status and work with states, other federal agencies, private landowners, tribes, and other partners to strengthen efforts to conserve the species.

Why did the Service decide that listing is warranted but precluded for the wolverine when the polar bear was found warranted and listed as threatened when the primary threat for both species is climate change?

Climate change was the primary threat identified for both polar bear and wolverine. Although there is a difference in the degree to which climate change is affecting the arctic ecosystems versus the lower latitude high elevation ecosystems of the western mountains of the Lower 48 (with climate change having a more severe impact in the near future in Arctic ecosystems), the main reason for the difference in listing the polar bear as threatened versus a warranted but precluded finding for wolverine relates to the Service's listing prioritization and funding processes.

The polar bear is classified as a species, and because of that, the highest priority that the Service could assign it is a listing priority number (LPN) of 2. The contiguous U.S. population of wolverine is a distinct population segment (DPS) of the North American subspecies of wolverine. The highest priority that can be assigned to a distinct population segment is an LPN of 3.

The wolverine DPS was assigned an LPN of 6. For the wolverine DPS, the magnitude of the threats were considered high, because they are acting on the entire range of the DPS. However, the imminence of the threats was considered low because, to date, there have been no documented population level impacts caused by the primary threat. This situation contrasts with that of the polar bear, where the Service determined that climate change was an imminent threat. When a DPS has threats of high magnitude, but low imminence, as is the case with wolverine, the Service assigns an LPN of 6 to that DPS based on LPN guidance.

The Service has a significant number of LPN 2's for which listing determinations have yet to be funded. Even with the polar bear as LPN of 2, there were still many other LPN 2's with greater risk of extinction, which would normally have precluded the Service from funding a listing proposal using Listing Program funds. For the polar bear, however, there was funding available through the Marine Mammals Program (MMP) to fund the initial proposal. Due to the complexity of the issue and the funding available from MMP, the Service made the decision to move forward using MMP funds. Then, because the final listing was statutory, the Service was able to use Listing Program funds for that. Wolverine has been assigned a LPN of 6. There are many other species where the imminence and magnitude of threats is greater, therefore this would not warrant the funds to work on a listing proposal at this time.

What if the wolverine DPS is proposed for listing?

When a "warranted but precluded" finding is made for a species, the Service classifies it as a candidate for listing. If the Service proposes the wolverine DPS for listing in the future, a public comment period will be opened, which will allow the public an opportunity to provide comment and information on the proposed listed species. The Service will then consider all received information in finalizing this listing decision.

If the wolverine DPS is listed in the future, what activities could be impacted?

Due to the generally remote nature of the high-elevation habitat that wolverines use, the Service expects few activities would be directly impacted by a future listing. However, the wolverine harvest season in Montana would be closed. Plans for activities by government agencies in wolverine habitats would be analyzed for impacts to the species, and potentially altered to reduce or remove adverse impacts. Activities that may be subject to such analyses include dispersed recreation, infrastructure development, road building, and development of transportation corridors. This does not mean that activities that impact wolverines will be precluded from wolverine habitat. In practice, most activities proposed in habitat occupied by endangered species can occur without change or with minor changes to ensure that impacts to listed species are minimized.

Although the primary threat to wolverines is climate changes due to by both natural and human-caused factors, the Service does not anticipate that measures to address climate change would result from listing the wolverine DPS.

What can landowners do to conserve candidate species?

The Service works with private landowners, tribes, and other federal and state agencies, including other programs within the Service to forge voluntary conservation agreements benefiting candidates

and other species-at-risk. The Service also provides technical assistance on designing and implementing conservation actions to address threats identified in these species assessments.

The Service, in conjunction with federal partners provides financial and technical assistance to landowners seeking to conserve candidate species on their land through the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Additional financial assistance is available through various Service grants and agreements, as well as through Farm Bill and Department of Defense programs. In addition, the Service has the ability to take advantage of the additional management flexibility afforded to candidate species by facilitating development and implementation of Candidate Conservation Agreements (CCAs) and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAAs).

CCAs are formal, voluntary agreements between the Service and one or more parties to address the conservation needs of one or more candidate species. Participants voluntarily commit to implement specific actions designed to remove or reduce threats to the covered species. CCAs can involve both federal and non-federal lands. Development and implementation of CCAs can provide CCA participants with a strong indication of how activities will be conducted when a species becomes listed. For non-federal landowners seeking regulatory assurances, CCAAs are an effective tool. A CCAA provides participating property owners with a permit containing assurances that if they implement certain conservation actions for species included in the agreement, they will not be required to implement additional conservation measures beyond those in the CCAA in the event the species becomes listed. Also, additional land, water, or resource use limitations will not be imposed on them should the species become listed in the future, unless they consent to the change. More than 60 landowners in 15 states have enrolled over 1 million acres of habitat for 39 species. For additional information on these tools, see <http://www.fws.gov/endangered/what-we-do/cca.html>.

What if someone has important information regarding the wolverine DPS?

The public is encouraged to continue to provide information to the Service regarding the status of the wolverine DPS. Information provided by the public is an important source in making the best possible decision. Information can be provided to the Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Field Office, 585 Shepard Way, Helena, Montana, 59601.

Where can I find more information on the 12-month finding and other wolverine conservation efforts?

A copy of the finding and other information about the wolverine is available online at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/wolverine> or by contacting the Montana Field Office at 406-449-5225.