



## **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

### **Record of Decision**

### **Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan**

**September 2003**

Since 1974, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has managed wolves in Montana under the authority of the federal Endangered Species Act.

Today, gray wolves are thriving and expanding in number and distribution in Montana, and, late last year, USFWS determined that wolves met the biological requirements for recovery in the northern Rockies. The gray wolf's rapid recovery is the result of natural emigration from Canada, and a federal effort that reintroduced wolves into Yellowstone National Park and the wilderness areas of central Idaho.

Before USFWS will propose to delist the wolf, however, federal managers must be confident that a viable population of gray wolves will persist if the protections of the ESA are removed. To provide that assurance, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming must develop conservation and management plans and adopt other regulatory mechanisms in state law. Upon delisting, management authority for wolves will return to the state governments where wolves reside.

In its Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, FWP recommends that the State of Montana adopt a wolf conservation and management plan. The plan would not be implemented until USFWS delists the species and transfers legal authority.

Montana statutes charge FWP with conservation and management of resident wildlife. FWP recognizes the gray wolf as a native species and is committed to managing the recovered population within Montana. FWP will implement conservation and management strategies to make sure that all federal requirements are met, and that wolves are integrated back into Montana's wildlife heritage and Montana's wildlife management programs.

In its Final EIS, FWP considered five alternative approaches that represent the philosophical spectrum of peoples' values, opinions, and beliefs--the social factors that need to be considered. I select Alternative 2, the "Updated Council" alternative as Montana's wolf conservation and management plan because it achieves a balance between the biological needs of wolves and the concerns expressed by the Montana Wolf Management Advisory Council and the public who played a significant role in crafting the plan.

This alternative is the best overall approach. It reflects public sentiment calling on FWP to seek common ground and to move forward with a state-led program that is consistent with modern scientific wildlife conservation and management principles.

FWP will conserve and manage wolves within the context of social tolerance, wildlife ecology, and Montana's requirement to sustain a recovered population. The plan's adaptive-management framework provides the flexibility to implement a balanced program within a complex management environment that includes people, a diverse physical and ecological landscape, and, now, wolves.

The plan will address wolf conservation and management anywhere wolves occur in Montana, except where management authority is otherwise reserved to other jurisdictions, such as Montana's Indian tribes. The wolf conservation and management plan will be implemented through the combined decisions and actions of the FWP Helena Headquarters staff, the FWP Commission, the seven FWP administrative regions, the Montana Department of Livestock, USDA Wildlife Services (WS), local law enforcement and county authorities, and other cooperators.

I did not select Alternative 1 (No Action) because FWP is prepared and willing to take on the challenges, responsibilities, and benefits of managing a recovered wolf population. Wolves are now a part of Montana's landscape and FWP is the appropriate state agency to manage resident wildlife. I did not select Alternative 3 (Additional Wolf) because FWP desires to have the greatest degree of flexibility in selecting management tools upon delisting and because it does not include a compensation program. I did not select Alternative 4 (Minimum Wolf) because it does not allow FWP to manage wolves within an adaptive framework, and it is inconsistent with the recommendations of the Montana Wolf Management Advisory Council. It could also constrain FWP's flexibility because the wolf population would hover close to the level at which it may be relisted.

Under Alternative 5 (Contingency), FWP would seek an interim agreement with federal authorities to employ some of the Updated Council Alternative if delisting were delayed. Upon delisting, FWP would implement the remaining elements that had been prohibited by federal regulations. Although the Contingency alternative allows FWP to respond to citizens' concerns about delays and their interest in a state-led program even while wolves were still listed, I did not select this alternative because I would like FWP to assume management authority for a completely delisted wolf population and to proceed with a program guided entirely by state laws, administrative rules, and policies. I may reconsider this decision in the future if delisting is not initiated and completed in a timely fashion.

The effect of my decision is that, upon federal delisting, FWP will assume the responsibility for wolf management and that wolves will be integrated with other wildlife management programs. By assuming leadership for wolf management, FWP would commit staff and financial resources to fulfill the needs of the wolf program, to balance and safeguard the investments in ungulate and large carnivore restoration, and to meet the needs of Montana citizens. FWP would also commit to securing adequate funding to fully implement the plan. The benefit of the decision is the long-term perpetuation of a viable healthy gray wolf population that can provide aesthetic and

recreational benefits to Montanans and visitors to our state, while at the same time adequately addressing the challenges posed by wolf restoration.

Wolves will be present in Montana well into the future and localized impacts may occur. FWP will mitigate or lessen the impacts where possible, while still maintaining a secure and healthy wolf population. The adaptive management framework offers FWP the flexibility to implement a balanced program within a complex environment that includes people, a diverse physical and ecological landscape, and wolves. FWP's experience with managing mountain lions and black bears demonstrates that when people are included as a part of the management environment and FWP has flexibility to respond under widely different circumstances, trust, understanding, and tolerance are enhanced.

In recommending the Updated Council alternative, FWP considered all relevant state laws-- including each of the new laws passed by the 2003 Montana Legislature that have potential relevance to wolf conservation and management-- administrative rules, and policies. The plan allows FWP to meet its legal requirements to maintain a secure, recovered population, comply with state laws and FWP Commission policy, lessen potential negative impacts to those most directly affected by wolf presence, and to integrate the gray wolf within Montana's wildlife heritage.

Concurred by the FWP Commission in action at its September 11, 2003 meeting.

/s/ Jeff Hagener

September 11, 2003

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M. Jeff Hagener  
Director

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Date