

Alexander Archipelago Wolf 12-month Finding

Questions & Answers

Q1: What is a 12-month finding and what did the Service conclude?

A: When the Service receives a petition to list a species as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), it first reviews the information submitted to determine whether it presents substantial evidence that listing may be warranted (called a 90-day finding). If the petition is determined to be “substantial”, we have one year from the date of receipt to issue a determination on whether listing is warranted (called a 12-month finding). The 12-month finding can result in one of three determinations: the species does not warrant federal protection; the species does warrant federal protection but is precluded from being listed by other higher priority actions; or the species warrants federal protection and the Service will issue a proposed rule to list it under the ESA. In our 12-month finding on the petition, submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity and Greenpeace, to list the Alexander Archipelago wolf as endangered or threatened under the ESA, we concluded that listing is not warranted.

Q2: Is the Alexander Archipelago wolf a unique subspecies of wolf, or are they the same subspecies that exists elsewhere in Alaska, Canada, or the lower 48 states?

A: The Service acknowledges that the taxonomic status of wolves in southeastern Alaska and coastal British Columbia is uncertain. Nonetheless, after reviewing the best available information, including genetic analyses conducted since 1997 when the status of the Alexander Archipelago wolf was last considered, we found persuasive evidence suggesting that wolves in southeastern Alaska and coastal British Columbia currently form an ecological and genetic unit worthy of analysis under the ESA. For the purpose of this 12-month finding, we assume that the Alexander Archipelago wolf (*Canis lupus ligoni*) is a valid subspecies of gray wolf that occupies southeastern Alaska and coastal British Columbia, but recognize that its distribution boundaries likely are porous and are not defined sharply.

Q3: Where do Alexander Archipelago wolves live?

A: The Alexander Archipelago wolf currently occurs along the mainland of southeastern Alaska and coastal British Columbia and on several island complexes, which are comprised of more than 22,000 islands of varying size, west of the Coast Mountain Range. These coastal wolves are found on all of the larger islands in this area except Admiralty, Baranof, and Chichagof islands and all of the Haida Gwaii, or Queen Charlotte Islands.

Q4: What is the current population estimate for the Alexander Archipelago wolf?

A: The Service estimates a current rangewide population of about 850–2,700 Alexander Archipelago wolves. The majority (roughly 62 percent) occur in coastal British Columbia, with approximately 200–650 wolves in the southern portion and 300–1,050 wolves in the northern portion. In southeastern Alaska, we estimate that the mainland contains 150–450 wolves, the islands in the middle portion of the area, including Mitkof, Kuiu, and Kupreanof islands, contain 150–350 wolves, and the southwestern set of islands, including Prince of Wales Island, has 50–159 wolves.

Q5: What information did the Service consider in determining that listing is not warranted?

A: Section 4(a)(1) of the ESA requires the Service to determine whether a species is endangered or threatened based on one or more of the following factors: (1) The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of the species’ habitat or range; (2) Overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; (3) Disease or predation; (4) The inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanism; or (5) Other natural or man-made factors affecting the species’ continued existence. In making this decision, the Service conducted a thorough review of these factors for the Alexander Archipelago wolf using the best scientific and commercial information available, which is outlined in a peer-reviewed Species Status Assessment.

We identified multiple stressors that may be impacting individuals and populations of the Alexander Archipelago wolf, although most of them have the potential to affect wolves indirectly, not directly. Key stressors examined as part of this assessment include timber harvest, road development, wolf harvest, and climate-related events. Of these, wolf harvest is the only source of direct mortality that may have an impact at the population and rangewide levels. Although road development has little direct effect on wolves, roads provide access for hunters and trappers to areas that otherwise may be inaccessible or difficult to access. Timber harvest and winter severity influence deer habitat capability and abundance, which can impact wolf populations, especially if other ungulate prey species are not available. We also considered a variety of other stressors such as effects of small populations, oil development, overexploitation of salmon, and hybridization with dogs.

Q6: Is Prince of Wales Island a “significant portion of the range” of the Alexander Archipelago wolf? How do you determine a “significant portion of the range”?

A: The “significant portion of its range” language appears in the statutory definitions of “endangered species” and “threatened species” and is used in our evaluation of whether a species should be listed. If the Service determines that a species is not endangered or threatened throughout all of its range, we then consider whether a portion of the range contributes to the viability of the species in a “significant” way such that, without the members in that portion, the

species or subspecies as a whole would be in danger of extinction, or likely to become so in the foreseeable future, throughout all of its range.

Prince of Wales and adjacent Islands fall within the area referred to as Game Management Unit 2 (GMU 2) in southeastern Alaska. We found that stressors are substantially greater in GMU 2 than in other portions of the Alexander Archipelago wolf's range. However, GMU 2 constitutes only 4 percent of the total range of the species. We also estimated that only 6 percent of the current rangewide population occupies GMU 2. Additionally, given the relative insularity and peripheral geographic position of GMU 2 compared to the rest of the range, the population contributes little demographically and genetically to the taxon. Therefore, while the potential stressors are greater in GMU 2, the contribution of GMU 2 to the viability of the taxon as a whole is not "significant."

Q7: Are wolves on Prince of Wales Island different or distinct from other wolves in southeastern Alaska?

A: The Endangered Species Act allows the listing and delisting of species, subspecies, and distinct population segments (DPS) of vertebrate animals. To qualify as a DPS under Service policy, a population segment must be both "discrete" and biologically or ecologically "significant" to the species as a whole.

The Service determined that the Prince of Wales Island population segment (GMU 2) is separated from other populations of Alexander Archipelago wolf as a consequence of physical and physiological factors and, as a result, is "discrete" under the Service's DPS policy. We then considered the importance of the population segment to the broader taxon to which it belongs. Based on a review of the best available information, we determined that the GMU 2 population segment did not satisfy the "significance" criteria under the Service's DPS policy because the population does not persist in an unusual or unique ecological setting; loss of the population would not result in a significant gap in the range; and the population does not differ markedly from other populations based on its genetic characteristics. Therefore, wolves on Prince of Wales Island do not qualify as a DPS under the Service's 1996 DPS policy.

Q8: What are the next steps in the process?

A: Our finding is a final agency action. We will pursue opportunities to work with partners to conserve wolf populations in southeastern Alaska and coastal British Columbia. If new information emerges that suggests we should take another look at whether the Alexander Archipelago wolf should be protected under the ESA, we will do so.