

Questions and Answers

Withdrawal of Proposal to List the Wolverine Under the Endangered Species Act

Q: What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s determination regarding the status of the wolverine distinct population segment?

A: The Service has determined that the wolverine does not warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and is accordingly withdrawing its listing proposal. The Service recognizes climate change is a reality, with clear and tangible impacts to many species. However, in the case of the wolverine, there is uncertainty about how and when the effects of climate change might affect this population of wolverine.

Q: Why did the Service determine that the effects of climate change are not a threat such that the species warrants listing under the ESA?

A: The Service has concluded that there is significant uncertainty about how the effects of climate change will affect wolverines and their habitat in the foreseeable future. This uncertainty exists at several levels: uncertainty about fine-scale changes in snow cover and persistence that might affect denning sites, whether those potential snow impacts would limit the suitability of habitat within the home range of an individual wolverine, and whether any of those factors would limit wolverine populations in the foreseeable future.

Q: What information did the Service use to conclude at this time that listing is not warranted?

A: The Service must use the best available scientific and commercial information in making a listing decision. We use a thorough, open and deliberative process involving peer review and public comment on every listing proposal. We consider and analyze the important information obtained through this process when making our final listing determination. In this case, while the data clearly indicate that the climate is changing, the available information does not lead to a reliable prediction that wolverines are likely to become in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future.

Q: How does the Service’s decision on wolverine compare to other listing decisions involving species affected by climate change?

A: The Service has made recent listing decisions on the American pika, black-footed albatross and polar bear, and added the Pacific walrus to the candidate list. Modeling was used to evaluate how the effects from climate change might affect these species’ habitats. The result was a “not

warranted” finding for pika because we found that the predicted degree of temperature increase was within the thermal tolerance for the species. We also made a “not warranted” finding for the black-footed albatross. We listed the polar bear as a threatened species. While we added the walrus to the list of candidate species, we have not made a final determination as to whether it meets the statutory definition of a “threatened species” or an “endangered species.”

A major difference between polar bear and wolverine is the lack of certainty about specific climate-affected habitat changes and how those changes would link to wolverine demographic parameters. That is, if climate-induced changes to habitat occur, when and how will they cause changes in survival or reproduction of wolverines? We simply do not know enough about the specific effects of climate change on wolverine habitat and how potential changes would likely affect this wolverine population. We know that wolverines need areas with deep, persistent spring snow for denning. However, we have no information to suggest that den sites will become limiting in the future as a result of climate change impacts.

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

A: Wolverines are proactively managed by all wolverine range states and wolverine populations continue to increase. In Washington, Oregon, Colorado and California, they are listed under state endangered species acts, which make it illegal to kill or otherwise harm wolverines. They are also protected from harvest in Idaho, Wyoming and Nevada, and there is no open harvest season in Utah. Montana is currently the only state in which wolverine harvest is legal. Here, the wolverine is intensively and professionally managed as a furbearing species with a tightly regulated harvest that avoids concentration of take in any particular geographic area. However, trapping of wolverines is currently suspended there too.

Q: Now that the Service has withdrawn the proposed listing of the wolverine DPS what will happen next?

A: Wolverine conservation and management responsibility will remain primarily with the state wildlife agencies in the states where wolverines are found. The Service will continue to work closely with those states to monitor wolverine populations and any impacts to the species due to climate change and other threats. If new information emerges that suggests we should take another look at whether the species should be protected under the ESA, we will do so.

Q: What is the current population estimate for wolverines?

A: We currently estimate the wolverine population in the lower 48 states to be about 250 to 300. Additionally, evidence suggests that wolverine populations grew and expanded in the second half of the last century and may continue to expand into suitable, unoccupied habitat. For example, wolverine sightings outside formerly known habitat occurred in the Sierra Nevada

range in California in 2008 and in Colorado in 2012. And in April 2014, a wolverine was seen in the Uinta Range of Utah—the first confirmed sighting of the species in that state in some 30 years. Currently, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that wolverine habitat impacts due to the effects of climate change will affect the population in the foreseeable future.

Q: What is the definition of a “threatened species” and an “endangered species”?

A: A “threatened species” is a plant or animal for which the Service has sufficient information on its biological status and threats to determine that it is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range. An “endangered species” is any species which is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

Q: Why is this proposed listing withdrawal being done now?

A: Under the ESA, the Service is required to finalize a listing determination within one year of proposing such listing. The Service, however, can extend that deadline for up to 6-months if there is substantial disagreement concerning the sufficiency and accuracy of the data on which the listing is based. The Service invoked this 6-month extension for final listing determination for the wolverine to reconcile disagreement among scientists regarding the impacts of climate change on wolverines. The six-month extension has expired and the Service is required to make a final determination.

Q: Why did the Service’s regional directors come to a different conclusion than some of the agency’s own staff to recommend not listing?

A: The Service’s regional directors make recommendations to the Director based on a synthesis of the entire body of scientific evidence. This includes the analysis and recommendations of teams of biologists in field and the regional offices, public comments and peer reviews by scientific experts outside of the Service, and published literature. In this case, all three regional directors in the regions encompassing the range of the wolverine determined there was insufficient certainty that the species would become a threatened or endangered species within the foreseeable future. The ESA itself defines a “threatened species” as one that is likely to become endangered (in danger of extinction) within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

The regional directors all agreed that while climate change is occurring, the impacts of that change on wolverines are uncertain within the foreseeable future. Wolverine dens typically occur at high elevation and on north facing slopes. The conclusions in the proposed rule about habitat loss for wolverines were based on loss of spring snow at the scale of the overall range of the wolverine and did not scale down to areas specifically selected by wolverines for dens. The

climate change models are unable to reliably predict snowfall amounts and/or persistence at a fine enough scale to lead us to predict that den sites would become limiting. In fact, there currently is insufficient evidence for us to find that wolverine habitat impacts due to the effects of climate change will affect the population in the foreseeable future. Evidence suggests wolverines are continuing to expand both within their current habitats, and into suitable habitat not either currently occupied or occupied with a few individuals.

The Service Director concurred with these findings and accordingly made the final decision to withdraw the proposal.