

## Gray Wolf Final Delisting Determination Questions and Answers

### **What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service finalized a rule to delist gray wolves (*Canis lupis*) currently listed in the contiguous United States and Mexico under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) due to recovery. This final determination is specific to the gray wolf and does not include the separate listing of the Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*) as endangered under the ESA. Recovery of the gray wolf under the ESA is one of our nation's great conservation successes, with the wolf joining species such as the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, American alligator and brown pelican that have been brought back from the brink with the help of the ESA.

### **How were gray wolves recovered?**

This remarkable [recovery success](#) is a result of more than 45 years of collaboration and partnerships with states, tribes, conservation organizations, private landowners and other federal partners. Many of our state and tribal partners in areas where the wolf is already delisted continue to demonstrate their ability to responsibly manage wolf populations so they are healthy and sustainable. The regulatory mechanisms put in place by these partners will continue to benefit gray wolves and ensure the long-term survival of the species.

The ESA does not require wolves to be present throughout all of its former range, or for populations to be at historic levels for delisting to occur. The measure under the ESA is whether wolves are in danger of extinction (endangered) or at risk of becoming so in the foreseeable future (threatened) throughout all or a significant portion of its range. By any scientific measure, gray wolves no longer meet the ESA's standard for protection and so should be delisted.

[Under the ESA](#), if we determine that a species is no longer threatened or endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range, the Service must publish in the *Federal Register* a proposed rule to remove the species from the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants in title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations (50 CFR 17.11 and 17.12).

### **What is the range of gray wolves?**

Today, the vast majority of wolves in the lower 48 exist as two large, stable or growing populations totaling more than 6,000 individuals that are broadly distributed across the northern portions of three states in the Great Lakes area and all or portions of five states in the northern Rocky Mountains.

The population in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota is about 4,200 strong, with the Northern Rocky Mountains population in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Oregon, Washington, northern California and most recently in northwest Colorado standing at around 1,900. There are further 12,000-14,000 wolves in eastern Canada and 15,000 in western Canada, each of which is connected to the adjacent gray wolf population in the United States. Wolves have also begun to expand into western Oregon, western Washington, northern California and most recently in northwest Colorado.

In western Oregon, western Washington and northern California there are seven known breeding pairs (note: because of effective documented dispersal, wolves in these states are an extension of the metapopulation of wolves in western Canada and the northern Rocky Mountains). In addition, Colorado Parks and Wildlife personnel confirmed the presence of a single group of at least six wolves in northwest Colorado.

Lone long-distance dispersing wolves have been reported from the listed states of Vermont, Massachusetts, New York, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Arizona and Nevada. The total number of confirmed records in each of these states, since the early 2000s, ranges from one in Nevada to at least 27 in North Dakota.

### **What is the history of gray wolves under the ESA?**

Federal protections were first established for two species of wolves under the [Endangered Species List in 1967](#) the red wolf (*Canis niger*) and the eastern timber wolf (*Canis lupus lycaon*).

This List was published on March 11, 1967, under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966 – the first piece of federal legislation that would allow native species of fish and wildlife, at risk of extinction, to be formally protected within their range. This eventually became the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

In 1978, the Service published a rule reclassifying the gray wolf as an endangered population at the taxonomic species level (*C. lupus*) throughout the contiguous United States and Mexico, except for the Minnesota gray wolf population, which was classified as threatened. We continue to recognize the red wolf as the species *C. rufus*, and note that it is listed as endangered where found. We did not consider red wolves further in the proposed rule, and the red wolf listing is not affected by the final delisting determination.

Wolves have never been threatened or endangered in [Alaska](#). There are an estimated 7,000 to 11,000 gray wolves in the state.

### **At the time of listing under the ESA, where did wolves remain and how many were there?**

Excluding Alaska, wolves occurred in only two places in the entire lower 48 United States. A population persisted in northeastern Minnesota, and a small, isolated group of about 40 wolves occurred on Isle Royale, Michigan. The Minnesota wolf population was the only major U.S. population in existence outside Alaska at this time and numbered about 1,000 individuals.

While the Minnesota population was small compared to historical numbers and range within the lower 48 United States, it had not undergone a significant decline since about 1900. By 1978, when several gray wolf subspecies were consolidated into a single lower 48 United States and Mexico listing and a separate Minnesota listing under the ESA, the gray wolf population in Minnesota had increased to an estimated 1,235 wolves.

Subsequently, wolves from Canada occasionally dispersed south and successfully began recolonizing northwest Montana in 1986. In 1995 and 1996, 66 wolves from southwestern Canada were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho.

### **What is the current legal status of gray wolves?**

The effect of this final rulemaking action is to remove all gray wolves in the lower 48 states from the list of species protected under the ESA. Gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains were delisted from the ESA in 2011 and 2012. However, court decisions subsequently overturned the delisting of wolves in Wyoming. We succeeded in reversing the Wyoming decision on appeal in 2017. Wolves have never been listed in Alaska.

This final rule only addresses gray wolves that are currently listed under the ESA. It is specific to the gray wolf and does not include the separate listings of the [Mexican wolf](#) subspecies and the [red wolf](#) species.

### **What is the final rule based on?**

In making this final determination to delist gray wolves is based on sound science, a thorough analysis of threats and how they have been alleviated and the ongoing commitment and proven track record of states and tribes to manage for healthy wolf populations once delisted. The Service analyzed a number of factors, including human-caused mortality, habitat and prey availability, disease and parasites, genetics, effects of climate change, recovery activities and post-delisting regulatory mechanisms, and predictions about how these may affect wolves in the future.

The finding of our review was clear – the gray wolf has recovered by any and all measures required under the ESA. Gray wolves are no longer in danger of extinction or at risk of becoming so in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of the species' range. Once the science indicates a species has recovered, it is the obligation of the Service to delist it and return management authority to the states so that we can focus our limited resources on those species that still require conservation attention.

### **What will happen if gray wolf population numbers decrease?**

The Service has agreements from several states to manage wolf populations at sustainable levels, so we are confident that gray wolf numbers will remain strong. We will continue to monitor the delisted wolf populations for the statutory five years to ensure they continue to sustain their numbers. Although we do not expect it will ever be necessary, as with all recovered species, we may consider relisting, and even emergency relisting, if such an action is warranted.

### **Will delisting mean wolf populations will be decimated by hunting?**

No. State and tribal wildlife agencies have a long track record of successfully managing wildlife in their states, including deer, elk, wild turkeys and many other game and non-game species. States will begin (Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin) or continue (Montana, Idaho and Wyoming) to manage wolves according to their Service approved gray wolf management plans. States in which gray wolves are currently recolonizing, Washington, Oregon and California, also have management plans that support wolf reestablishment in their states.

As with many species of wildlife, hunting is an accepted and successful management tool that helps to reduce conflicts with humans, maintain stable populations, generate public support and benefits all wildlife thanks to habitat improvements made possible by revenue collected from hunters. The Service is confident in the ability of state and tribal wildlife agencies to successfully manage wolf populations. Although we do not expect it will ever be necessary, we could consider relisting, and even emergency relisting wolves, if such an action were warranted.

The ESA is not designed to permanently protect individual animals from hunting or other active management. The purpose of the ESA is to prevent the extinction of imperiled species and to recover them. Once the threshold of recovery has been met, we can – and must – return their management to state and tribal wildlife agencies.

### **Why was the wolf reclassified in 1978 and what was the result of that action?**

When the gray wolf (*C. lupus*) was reclassified in March 1978 (replacing multiple subspecies listings with two *C. lupus* population listings), it had been extirpated from much of its historical range in the

contiguous United States. The 1978 reclassification was undertaken to address changes in our understanding of gray wolf taxonomy and protect all gray wolves in the lower 48 states and Mexico, rather than an indication of where gray wolves actually existed or where gray wolf recovery efforts were necessary.

The 1978 reclassification resulted in inclusion of large areas of the contiguous United States where gray wolves were extirpated, as well as the mid-Atlantic and southeastern United States areas where long-held differences of opinion regarding the precise boundary of the species' historical range remain.

While this generalized approach to the listing facilitated recovery of wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains and western Great Lakes, it also erroneously included areas outside the species' historical range and was misread by some members of the public as an expression of a larger gray wolf recovery effort not required by the ESA and never intended by the Service.

**Does the Service plan to continue offering funding for prevention of wolf-livestock conflict and reimbursing for depredated livestock?**

The Service currently administers the Wolf-Livestock Loss Demonstration Program, which gives grants to states and tribes for proactive efforts to reduce wolf-livestock conflict as well as to compensate for confirmed wolf depredation. The Service has recommended other programs that are better suited to deliver this funding, such as the USDA's livestock indemnity program. Additionally, funding for recovery of listed species is limited and this program takes valuable resources that could be otherwise used to conserve species in need of the ESA protections.

**Where can I find more information?**

Detailed background information on gray wolves in the United States can be found in a separate Gray Wolf Biological Report (see USFWS 2018, entire). This document can be found along with this final delisting rule and the post-delisting monitoring plan at <http://www.regulations.gov> in Docket No. FWS-HW-ES-2018-0097 (see Supplemental Documents). Comments and materials we received, as well as supporting documentation we used in preparing this rule, are available for public inspection at <http://www.regulations.gov>.

The final rule will publish in the *Federal Register* on November 3, 2020, and be effective 60 days after on January 4, 2021.

More information is available online at: <https://www.fws.gov/home/wolfrecovery/>.