

News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Publishes Draft Environmental Assessment of Idaho's Request to Manage Gray Wolves in the Lolo Elk Management Zone

Consideration of Similar Action in Montana Under Way

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today the availability of a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) of Idaho Department of Fish and Game's request to manage gray wolves in the Lolo Elk Management Zone in north central Idaho in response to impacts of wolf predation on elk.

In 2008, the Service issued a revised wolf management rule under Section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act for the Northern Rocky Mountain area allowing states or tribes to lethally take wolves within the experimental population area when wolf predation is having an unacceptable impact on wild ungulate populations. For this management action to occur, the Service must approve the proposal under the requirements of the 2008 10(j) rule. Specifically, the Service must find that the proposal is science-based, will not contribute to reducing the wolf population in the state below 20 breeding pairs and 200 wolves, and will not impede wolf recovery.

On September 24, 2010, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game submitted a proposal under the 2008 Section 10(j) rule to the Service requesting authority to reduce the wolf population in the Lolo Elk Management Zone in north central Idaho in response to impacts of wolves on elk.

The State of Montana, through Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, subsequently made a similar request of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That request is currently under review and the Service expects to

be issuing a Notice of Availability within 6 weeks. The requests from both Idaho and Montana are to allow the states to control wolves in specific areas under authority of the existing 10(j) wolf management rule.

The Idaho proposal, if approved, would allow the state to reduce the wolf population in the Lolo Zone to a minimum of 20 to 30 wolves in three to five packs from a current estimated level of 60 to 80 wolves. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game conducted a peer review and hosted a 14-day public comment period on the Lolo Zone proposal prior to submitting it to the Service.

“We appreciate the state’s efforts to submit a science-based, peer-reviewed proposal to the Service that addresses the impact of wolves on wild elk in the Lolo Zone,” said Brian Kelly, Idaho State Supervisor for the Service. “The purpose of our draft Environmental Assessment is to evaluate the potential effects of the state’s proposed action on the natural and human environment.”

For the entire Lolo Zone, the state’s 2010 survey estimated the population at 1,358 cow elk and 594 bull elk. The state’s zone-wide objectives are 6,100 – 9,100 cow elk and 1,300 – 1,900 bull elk. According to an analysis provided by the State of Idaho to support its application, “wolves are one of the major causes, if not the major cause, of the *current* population decline.” The state asserts that consequently, wolf predation is preventing cow elk abundance from reaching state management objectives. The state has implemented other conservation measures, including more liberal hunting seasons and bag limits for black bears and mountain lions, habitat improvement through prescribed burning and modifications to elk hunting frameworks that have reduced harvest, in an effort to address other factors that might influence growth rates of the Lolo Zone elk population.

The draft EA contains two alternatives: A Preferred Alternative and a No-Action Alternative. In addition to the two alternatives carried forward for analysis, there were several alternatives considered but eliminated from further consideration because they are not feasible or they are already being implemented and additional means of increasing the elk population are still needed. These alternatives include: elk habitat improvement, winter feeding of elk, increased enforcement against poaching, and active predator control.

The Preferred Alternative would allow Idaho to implement its proposal. If this alternative is chosen, the Service would then prepare a Final EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), which

would authorize lethal take of wolves in the Lolo Zone under Section 10(j). Under this alternative, the state would have authority to conduct its proposed wolf control plan.

Management activities would be intended to allow the elk population in the Lolo Elk Management Zone to increase while maintaining wolf populations that meet recovery objectives. This alternative includes monitoring both wolf and elk populations yearly to determine response to the implementation of management activities and adaptive changes in wolf removal based on yearly monitoring results.

The No-Action Alternative would deny the Idaho proposal. Under this alternative, wolves in the Lolo Elk Management Zone would continue to be managed by the Service as a non-essential experimental population and could be removed by the Service or its designated agents when livestock, pack animals or dogs are killed by wolves.

The Notice of Availability of the EA is available on the *Federal Register* web site at <http://www.regulations.gov>. The public is encouraged to review the draft EA and submit comments on site-specific effects of the proposed action. Written comments and information concerning this proposal must be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments.
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn Docket # FWS-R1-ES-2011-0009; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

Comments sent in any other form will not be considered. Comments must be received within 30 days, on or before March 14, 2011. The Service will post all comments on <http://www.regulations.gov>. This generally means the agency will post any personal information provided through the process.

For more information or for a copy of the materials, contact the Service's Idaho Fish and Wildlife Office at 208-378-5796. Individuals who are hearing impaired or speech impaired may call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at 800-877-8339.

The draft EA is also available on the Idaho Fish and Wildlife web site at <http://www.fws.gov/idaho>, along with the state's proposal, peer review and the state's responses to the peer review.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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