



Summary of the Proposal to Delist the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes Distinct Population Segment

Since the gray wolf was first listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1974, recovery programs have helped populations of this species rebound from the lows experienced during the middle of the 20th Century. Today, wolf recovery has been achieved in the Western Great Lakes region of the United States. As a result of this success, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed to remove ESA protection for the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes Distinct Population Segment.

Managing wolf populations in the United States

Gray wolves are currently listed as an endangered species in the lower 48 states, except in Minnesota where they are threatened. The Service currently operates three separate recovery programs for the gray wolf; each has its own recovery plan and recovery goals based on the unique characteristics and limitations of its geographic area. These three recovery programs have progressed at different speeds and have achieved different degrees of success.

The Service's current proposal, if finalized, would remove gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes DPS from the Federal list of endangered and threatened species because gray wolves in this DPS have recovered and no longer need the protection of the Endangered Species Act. The proposal would also remove critical habitat for the gray wolf in Michigan and Minnesota, and eliminate special rules for wolf management in Minnesota, as they are no longer needed.

The Service's proposal does not affect gray wolves in the West (Northern Rocky Mountains), in the Southwest, or anywhere outside the Western Great Lakes DPS; nor does it affect red wolves, a separate species found in the Southeast.



Western Great Lakes DPS

Wolf Recovery in the Western Great Lakes DPS

The Western Great Lakes DPS encompasses the entire states of Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin; the part of North Dakota north and east of the Missouri River upstream as far as Lake Sakakawea and east of U.S. Highway 83 to the Canadian border; the part of South Dakota north and east of the Missouri River; the parts of Iowa, Illinois and Indiana that are north of Interstate 80; and the part of Ohio north of I-80 and west of the Maumee River at Toledo. The DPS includes all the areas currently occupied by wolf packs in Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, as well as nearby areas in these states in which wolf packs may become established in the future. The DPS also includes surrounding areas into which wolves may disperse but are not likely to establish persistent packs.

The original Recovery Plan for the Eastern Timber Wolf and the 1992 revision of that plan established criteria to identify the point at which long-term population viability would be assured in the eastern United States. To achieve recovery, the plan called for maintaining and expanding the Minnesota wolf population and establishing at least one other gray wolf population in the East. According to the plan, this second population needed to sustain at least 100 animals for five consecutive years if located within 100 miles of the Minnesota population. If the second population was more than 100 miles away, it needed to support at least 200 animals for five consecutive years.

These recovery criteria have been met and exceeded. The Minnesota population has steadily expanded; the latest count in 2003-2004 found a minimum of 3,020 animals and data collected since then do not indicate a decline. An additional population is well-established in Michigan and Wisconsin, with numbers there of 405 and 425 respectively. Wolf numbers in those two states have exceeded 100 for the past 10 years.

The other major requirement to achieve recovery in the Western Great Lakes DPS is to have protections in place to ensure the continued survival of the wolf population in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan if the DPS is delisted. To prepare for assuming management of the species after Federal delisting, each of those states developed a wolf management plan with the goal of ensuring future survival of the state's wolf population. Those plans were signed by the head of the state's Department of Natural Resources after input from wolf experts and extensive public involvement.

Threats

In its proposal to delist the Western Great Lakes DPS of the gray wolf, the Service evaluated current and future threats to the species. These threats are spelled out by the ESA. They include loss or modification of habitat, overutilization for commercial or other purposes, disease or predation, inadequacy of existing laws or regulations (other than the ESA), and other natural or human-caused threats. If gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes DPS are delisted, the states and tribes will be responsible for their management. The degree to which future wolf populations in the Western Great Lakes DPS would face these threats depends mainly on how the states and tribes manage their wolves after delisting. Therefore, the Service evaluated the Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin wolf management plans accordingly and found that the plans would adequately protect wolves and would ensure their existence in the Western Great Lakes DPS for the foreseeable future. The Service has also contacted other federal land management agencies and Midwestern tribes to obtain information on their likely protection and management of wolves after delisting.

Management by States

State management plans that ensure long-term survival of the gray wolf are essential because, if the Service's proposal to delist is finalized, states (and tribes, as described below) would be responsible for conservation and management of the species. Those management plans describe how the states will ensure that the gray wolf populations survive.

In 2001, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources completed its comprehensive wolf management plan, which is based on the recommendations of a wolf management roundtable and on a state wolf management law passed in 2000. The plan includes provisions for population monitoring and management, management of problem wolves, management of wolf habitat and prey, enforcement of laws restricting take of wolves, public education, and increased staffing for wolf management and research. The plan divides the state into wolf management zones A and B, which correspond to zones 1-4 and zone 5, respectively, in the Federal wolf recovery plan. In Zone A, where over 80 percent of the wolves reside, state protections would be nearly as strict as current protections under the ESA, and we expect little or no resulting post-delisting population decline there. The protection provided by the plan to the Zone A wolves will ensure a state wolf population well above 1,600 in that zone. In Zone B, wolves could be killed to protect domestic animals, even if attacks or threatening behavior have not occurred. While a significant decrease in the Zone B wolf population may result, such a result would be consistent with the Federal recovery plan, which discourages the establishment of a wolf population in that portion of the state.

The Wisconsin wolf management plan has a goal of 350 wolves. It allows for different levels of management within four separate zones. The two zones which now contain most of the state's wolves would be managed to allow limited lethal control of problem wolves – when the population is greater than 250 – but in general, such control wouldn't be practiced on large blocks of public land. In the other two zones, which have limited habitat, control of problem wolves would be less restricted.

The Wisconsin plan also calls for monitoring, education, reimbursement for depredation losses, habitat management, coordination with tribes, and development of new legal protections. If the population exceeds 350, a proactive depredation control program would be allowed in all four zones and public harvest would be considered. Because the wolf population now exceeds this level, the state delisted gray wolves to Protected Wild Animal status on August 1, 2004. If numbers decline and stay below 250 for three years, the state will relist as threatened. If they decline to less than 80 for one year, the state will relist or reclassify the wolf as endangered. The Wisconsin management plan is currently under review, and the state intends to publish an appendix containing plan updates. There are no anticipated changes to the management goals.

Under the Michigan wolf management plan, wolves would be considered recovered in Michigan when a minimum sustainable population of 200 wolves is maintained for five consecutive years. The Upper Peninsula has had more than 200 wolves since the year 2000. That means that the gray wolf is eligible for state delisting once it is federally delisted. Following Federal delisting, the state intends to reclassify Michigan wolves to protected animal status and will develop regulations to prohibit take and establish the conditions in which lethal depredation control can be carried out by Michigan Department of Natural Resources personnel. The Michigan DNR plans to revise their wolf management. They are in the early stages and have begun to form a group of interested parties. That group will provide the DNR with a recommended management plan.

Management by Tribes

Although the tribes with wolves that visit or reside on their Reservations do not yet have management plans specific to the gray wolf, many tribes and multi-tribal organizations have indicated to us that they will continue to conserve wolves on Native American reservations in the western Great Lakes area. Upon request, we are working with the tribes to develop wolf management plans for the reservations.

Post-Delisting Monitoring

The ESA requires that when the Service delists a species it continues to be monitored for at least five additional years. If the species declines after delisting, the Service can begin the process to return it to the endangered and threatened species list, and can relist it on an emergency basis, if appropriate. Most monitoring plans focus on the species' population size, distribution, and productivity; threats to the species; and any legal or management needs that might be necessary to reduce threats.

A monitoring plan is under development for the gray wolf in the Western Great Lakes DPS and includes monitoring for five years in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Assisting the Service in developing the plan are members of the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Team. During the monitoring period, if the Service detects a change in wolf populations or a significant increase in threats, it can evaluate and change monitoring methods or consider relisting. At the end of the monitoring period, the Service will decide whether to relist, continue monitoring, or end monitoring.

Recent actions affecting the status of wolves in the Western Great Lakes

On April 1, 2003, the Service published a final rule that reclassified or delisted gray wolves, as appropriate, across their range in the 48 conterminous United States and Mexico. The first part of that rule delisted gray wolves in parts or all of 16 southern states, because that area is outside the historical range of the species. The second part of the final rule separated the remainder of the 32 states and Mexico into three gray wolf DPSs, and it gave each DPS a separate listing under the Act as threatened or endangered. Additionally, new special regulations under section 4(d) of the Act were established for portions of the Western and Eastern Gray Wolf DPSs.

Lawsuits opposing the 2003 final rule resulted in federal district court rulings against the Service which eliminated the three DPS listings and reverted all gray wolves south of Canada to endangered status, except those in Minnesota classified as threatened. Experimental populations of wolves in the northern U.S. Rockies and the Southwest retained their "nonessential experimental" status. These rulings also vacated the 2003 special rules under section 4(d) that authorized lethal control of problem wolves in the Eastern and Western DPSs. Because we had subsequently used the Eastern DPS as the basis for our July 21, 2004, gray wolf delisting proposal, that proposal cannot be finalized and will be withdrawn.

Public Comments

The Service's proposal to delist the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes DPS is found in the Federal Register. The public is invited to comment on the proposal; the Service will consider all comments received within 90 days of the date of publication in the *Federal Register*. Comments may be submitted by e-mail to WGLwolfdelist@fws.gov or by sending a letter to Western Great Lakes Wolf Delisting, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Whipple Federal Building, 1 Federal Drive, Fort Snelling, MN 55111-4056, or by sending

a fax to 612-713-5292, or through the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. The Service will also hold public hearings within the Western Great Lakes DPS to gather public input. More information on the proposal and public hearings can be found on the Service's Midwest website at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/wolf/>. In the event that our internet connection is not functional, please submit your comments by mail or fax.

Once the comment period has closed, the Service will review all comments and new information and make a decision on whether to finalize the proposal to delist the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes DPS.

Additional Information

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service posts information about the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes DPS on the internet at <http://www.fws.gov/midwest/wolf>. Individuals or groups wishing to be placed on the Service's mailing list to obtain updates on the status of the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes DPS can write to:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Gray Wolf Review
1 Federal Drive
Fort Snelling, MN 55111-4056

You may also use the GRAYWOLFMAIL@FWS.GOV address or call the Service's Gray Wolf Information Line at 612-713-7337. This phone line is for information requests only; comments on the proposal made by phone will not be accepted.