

Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Program 2011 Interagency Annual Report

A cooperative effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Nez Perce Tribe, National Park Service, Blackfeet Nation, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Wind River Tribes, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, Utah Department of Natural Resources, and USDA Wildlife Services.



Photo: USFWS

This annual report presents information on the status, distribution, and management of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf population from January 1, 2011 to December 31, 2011.

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Note to Readers:

In 2011, wolves were delisted and managed under state authority in Idaho, Montana, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, and north-central Utah. Post delisting monitoring requires each delisted state to submit an annual report to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The 2011 Interagency Annual Report is comprised of separate sections from Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Washington, federal agencies for Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park combined, and the overall U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northern Rockies Wolf Recovery Program.

This report can be viewed at <http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov/annualreports.htm> and may be copied and distributed as needed. You can download the Interagency Report in its entirety and cite the Interagency Report as suggested on the cover. Alternatively, you may download a state report or section of the Interagency Report and cite it individually.

Thank you for your interest in the Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Program.

M.D. Jimenez and S.A. Becker, USFWS

Abstract: The Northern Rocky Mountain Distinct Population Segment (NRM DPS) consists of Idaho (ID), Montana (MT), Wyoming (WY), eastern one-third of Washington (WA) and Oregon (OR), and a small part of north central Utah (UT). The 2011 NRM DPS wolf population contained $\geq 1,774$ wolves in ≥ 287 packs with ≥ 109 breeding pairs. Wolf packs, and especially breeding pairs, largely remained within the core recovery areas, but breeding pairs were again confirmed in eastern WA and OR. Agency control, legal harvest, the natural territorial behavior of wolves, and other causes of mortality maintained the wolf population at or slightly above 2010 levels ($\geq 1,723$). In 2011, Federal agencies spent approximately \$3,651,417 for wolf management. Private and state agencies paid \$309,553 in compensation for wolf-damage to livestock in 2011. Confirmed cattle death losses in 2011 (193) were virtually the same as in 2010 (199). Confirmed sheep losses in 2011 (162) were lower than in 2010 (245). In 2011, 166 depredating wolves were lethally removed by agency control, which includes legal take in defense of property by private citizens. During the year, MT removed 64 wolves by agency control and harvested 121 wolves during their hunting season; ID removed 63 wolves by agency control and harvested 200 wolves through regulated public hunting and trapping; and in WY, 37 wolves were removed by agency control. In OR, 2 wolves were removed by agency control, but no wolves were removed in WA or UT. On May 5, 2011, wolves were delisted throughout the entire NRM DPS with the exception of WY.

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NORTHERN ROCKIES BACKGROUND

Gray wolf populations were extirpated from the western U.S. by the 1930s. Subsequently, wolves from Canada occasionally dispersed south into Montana and Idaho but failed to survive long enough to reproduce. Eventually, public attitudes toward predators changed and wolves received legal protection with the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1973. Wolves began to successfully recolonize northwest Montana in the early 1980s. By 1995, there were 6 wolf packs in northwest Montana. In 1995 and 1996, 66 wolves from southwestern Canada were reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park (YNP; 31 wolves) and central Idaho (CID; 35 wolves). From 1989-2001, we also relocated wolves 117 times to reduce conflicts with livestock, including moving wolves among different recovery areas. This included 10 wolf pups from northwestern Montana whose pack was involved in chronic livestock deprecations. These pups were relocated to YNP and were released from their holding pen in spring 1997.

The Northern Rocky Mountain Distinct Population Segment (NRM DPS; Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, the eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of north central Utah) contains 3 core recovery areas: northwest Montana (NWMT; Figures 1, 2) includes northern Montana and the northern Idaho panhandle; the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA; Figures 1, 3) includes Wyoming and adjacent parts of Idaho and Montana; and the CID (Figures 1, 4) includes central Idaho and adjacent parts of southwest Montana. Wolves continued to recolonize areas of eastern Oregon and Washington adjacent to CID and NWMT in 2011 (Figures 1, 5). In May 2011, wolves were delisted throughout the entire NRM DPS with the exception of Wyoming. Wolves in Montana are managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) and wolves in Idaho are managed by Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDFG) with assistance from the Nez Perce Tribe (NPT). Tribes manage wolves on their tribal lands. Wolves in Wyoming continue to be managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The USFWS assists the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), and Utah Department of Natural Resources (UDNR) to manage wolves in their states.

NORTHERN ROCKIES WOLF SUMMARY 2011

Wolf Population: As the NRM DPS wolf population grew larger and our monitoring efforts remained constant, population estimates have become less precise. However, our minimum estimate of the NRM DPS wolf population is still very accurate compared to most estimates of wildlife population density and distribution in North America. In 2011, the NRM DPS minimum wolf population estimate increased slightly (~3%) from 2010 levels (Table 4b). Pack and breeding pair estimates in 2011 were similar to estimates obtained in 2010 (Tables 1a-c, 2a-b, 3a-c, 4b, 6). Moreover, the use of other indices of wolf population abundance, such as livestock damage, percentage of packs depredating, agency control, and site-specific research, suggested that the overall NRM DPS wolf population in 2011 was not appreciably larger than 2010 levels.

As of December 31, 2011, the minimum estimated gray wolf population within the NRM DPS was composed of at least 1,774 wolves in 287 packs (groups of two or more wolves with territories inside the NRM DPS that persisted until December 31, 2011; Table 4b). At least 109 packs met the definition of a breeding pair (packs that contained at least one adult male, one adult female, and two or more pups on December 31, 2011; Table 4b). At the end of 2011, there was a minimum of 431 wolves in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area (NWMT), 499 in the Greater Yellowstone Recovery Area (GYA), and 797 in the Central Idaho Recovery Area (CID; Table 4a, Figure 1, 6a). By state, within the NRM DPS, there were an estimated minimum of 653 wolves in Montana, 328 in Wyoming, and 746 in Idaho (Table 4b, Figure 7a). Twenty-nine wolves (5 packs, 1 breeding pair) were estimated to be in eastern Oregon and 18 wolves (3 packs, 2 breeding pairs) were found within the NRM DPS in eastern Washington (Table 4b, Figure 5). An additional two packs (one breeding pair) were known to exist in western Washington outside the NRM DPS. Minimum recovery goals of an equitably distributed wolf population containing at least 300 wolves and 30 breeding pairs in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming for at least 3 consecutive years have been exceeded in the NRM DPS since 2002 (Table 4b, Figure 1, 6a-b, 7a-b).

Wolf Packs: There were a minimum of 287 confirmed wolf packs in the NRM DPS at the end of 2011. Montana had a minimum of 130 confirmed packs at the end of 2011 and an additional 11 packs that were present at the beginning of the year, but were believed to no longer exist at the end of the year (Table 1a-c). In Wyoming, a minimum of 48 packs were documented at the end of 2011 with an additional 2 packs present at the beginning of the year no longer in existence by the end of the year (Table 2a-b). Idaho had a minimum of 101 confirmed packs at the end of 2011 and an additional 4 packs present at the beginning of the year that were believed to no longer exist at the end of the year (Table 3a-c). All packs in Oregon ($n = 5$) and Washington (NRM DPS = 3; outside NRM DPS = 2) continued to persist at year's end (Table 6, 7). No packs were documented in Utah.

Wolf Depredations: In 2011, cattle depredations were similar, sheep and other livestock depredations decreased, and dog depredations slightly increased compared to 2010 (Table 5a-c). Wolves in the NRM DPS subsist primarily on elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, and moose, but livestock are also attacked. Although confirmed depredations result in a comparatively small proportion of all livestock losses in the NRM DPS, wolf damage can be significant to some livestock producers in areas where wolves are present. Total confirmed livestock depredations

by wolves in 2011 were down slightly from 2010 levels and included 193 cattle, 162 sheep, 9 dogs, and 7 other livestock (5 horses and 2 domestic bison; Table 5a-c). Approximately 58 of 294 (~20%) known NRM DPS wolf packs (outside YNP) that existed at some point in 2011 were involved in at least one confirmed livestock or pet depredation. This is slightly lower than the 2010 estimate of 25%.

Agency Control of Problem Wolves: In the NRM DPS, lethal control of problem wolves (including agency control and legal take in defense of property by private citizens) decreased by approximately 36% in 2011 ($n = 166$) compared to 2010 ($n = 259$; Table 5a-c). In the three primary NRM DPS states, Wyoming removed the largest and Idaho removed the smallest proportion of their 2011 minimum estimated wolf population through agency control. For strictly comparative purposes, we estimated the absolute minimum number of wolves alive in 2011 by combining the 2011 NRM DPS minimum population estimate of 1,774 wolves with all known wolf mortalities from all causes ($n = 166$ agency control; $n = 322$ legal harvest; $n = 92$ other known mortalities). This sums to an absolute minimum NRM DPS estimate of 2,354 wolves known alive at some point in 2011 (MT = 869, ID = 1,042, WY = 392, OR = 32, WA = 19). The absolute minimum estimate was only used to compare relative rates of wolf removal among states and by cause (in this section, the “legal public harvest of wolves” section, and the “human-caused wolf mortality” section). Agency control removed approximately 7% of the absolute minimum NRM DPS estimated wolf population in 2011. By state, within the NRM DPS, agency control removed approximately 7% of the absolute minimum NRM DPS estimated wolf population in Montana, 9% in Wyoming, 6% in Idaho, and 6% in Oregon. Washington had no wolves removed through agency control in 2011.

Legal Public Harvest of Wolves: The NRM DPS gray wolf population was removed from federal protection in all states except Wyoming in May 2011 and, subsequently, legal public harvest was instituted during the fall of 2011 in Montana and Idaho. In 2011, 322 wolves were legally harvested in the NRM DPS which accounted for approximately 14% of the absolute minimum NRM DPS estimated wolf population. Legal harvest removed approximately 14% and 19% of Montana’s and Idaho’s absolute minimum estimated wolf populations in 2011, respectively. No legal public harvest occurred in Oregon, Washington, or Wyoming during 2011; however, one wolf from a Washington border pack was legally harvested in Idaho.

Human-Caused Wolf Mortality: In 2011, excluding agency control and legal harvest, other forms of human-caused mortality accounted for 19 known wolf mortalities in Montana, 8 in Wyoming, and 18 in Idaho. Oregon and Washington had no other forms of human-caused mortality in 2011. When all forms of human-caused mortality were combined (agency control, legal harvest, and other human-caused mortality) a total of 204 wolves were removed in Montana (~23% of absolute minimum Montana estimated population), 45 wolves were removed in Wyoming (~11% of absolute minimum Wyoming estimated population), 281 wolves were removed in Idaho (~27% of absolute minimum Idaho estimated population), 2 wolves were removed in Oregon (~6% of absolute minimum Oregon estimated population), and 1 wolf was removed in Washington (~5% of absolute minimum Washington estimated population). Overall, approximately 23% of the NRM DPS absolute minimum estimated wolf population was removed due to human-causes.

Wolf Funding: In 2011, federal agencies spent approximately \$3,651,417 for wolf management, including \$825,000 spent by USDA APHIS Wildlife Services to investigate reports of possible wolf damage and to control depredating wolves. Private and State compensation programs spent approximately \$309,553 to compensate livestock producers for confirmed, probable, and likely livestock damaged by NRM wolves.

Wolf Population Recovery: By every biological measure the NRM DPS wolf population is fully recovered. Resident packs have saturated suitable habitat in the core recovery areas and the population has exceeded recovery goals for 11 consecutive years. Dispersing wolves routinely travel between NRM states and Canada and successfully breed, demonstrating that the 3 subpopulations function as a single large NRM meta-population.

Data collected in 2011 describing wolf distribution, numbers, packs, breeding pairs, livestock depredations, compensation, wolf control, impacts on ungulates, and regulated public hunting suggest that the overall growth rate for the NRM wolf population has declined and the wolf population may be beginning to stabilize at some yet undetermined lower equilibrium based on natural carrying capacity in suitable habitat and human social tolerance.

Delisting the NRM DPS wolf population enables the States, Tribes, national park service and the Service to implement more efficient, sustainable, and cost effective wildlife programs that will allow them to maintain a fully recovered wolf population while attempting to minimize conflicts.

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