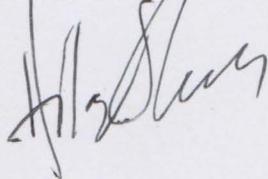


MEMO TO FILE

From: Hilary Cooley, Idaho Wolf Recovery Coordinator

Date: August 17, 2012

Subject: Review of Idaho Department of Fish and Game 2012-2013 Wolf Hunting Regulations



As stated in our 2009 delisting rule, we will initiate a status review and analysis of threats to determine whether relisting is warranted if a change in State law or management objectives significantly increases the threat to the wolf population. On August 24, 2011, we conducted such an "on-the-spot" review for Idaho to determine whether a full status review was warranted in light of: (1) Idaho Fish and Game Commission's decision to suspend their 2008-2012 wolf management plan at the end of 2010 and revert to their Service-approved 2002 wolf management plan and (2) finalization of Idaho's wolf hunting regulations for the 2011-2012 season. We conducted an evaluation of the changes in Idaho and not Montana that year because only Idaho decided to authorize no quotas in large portions of the State and no overall State-wide quota. This review determined that the changes did not represent a significant threat to the Idaho wolf population, thus a full status review was not initiated (Cooley 2011).

This memo represents a second "on-the-spot" assessment in light of the Idaho Fish and Game Commission's new regulations for the 2012 - 2013 wolf hunting season (Idaho Fish and Game Commission 2012).¹ The new regulations (see attachment A) include several changes:

- Increased bag limit in 6 of 13 wolf zones (Panhandle, Palouse-Hells Canyon, Lolo, Dworshak-Elk City, Selway, Middle Fork) from 2 to 5 hunting tags and from 3 to 5 trapping tags per individual. The remaining zones (Salmon, McCall-Weiser, Sawtooth, Southern Mountains, Beaverhead, Island Park, Southern Idaho) are limited to 2 hunting tags per individual. While a second year of experience will likely increase success (harvest) for some trappers and hunters, since only two hunters and one trapper reached last year's lower bag limits (J. Rachel 2012, pers. comm.), we think few will reach these expanded bag limits suggesting this change will have minimal impact on overall harvest levels.
- Extended hunting seasons in Beaverhead and Island Park zones from Aug 30 - Dec 31 (2011-2012) to Aug 30 - Jan 31 (2012-2013). The shorter season (compared to the rest of the state) in these zones is meant to limit impacts to wolves during peak times of wolf dispersal (January and February) to the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA), the most isolated core recovery area within the NRM DPS (Oakleaf *et al.* 2006, p. 554; vonHoldt *et al.* 2007, p. 19). While expanding the season another month will likely have some impact on effective migration, keeping the season in this area shorter than the remainder of the State provides some safeguard for genetic connectivity and limits harvest in this area during breeding season. Overall, we maintain that genetic diversity is so robust in the GYA (vonHoldt *et al.* 2010, p. 4423, Hebblewhite *et al.* 2010, p. 4384) that it is not a near or medium term threat

¹ Note, we do not anticipate conducting such a review every year. However, several components of the 2011-2012 and the 2012-2013 hunting seasons warranted such a review (including no Statewide harvest quota). We expect these on-the-spot reviews will no longer be necessary as the State achieves desired wolf population level reductions and future harvest levels are curtailed. However, the decision whether to conduct such a review will be made on a year-by-year basis.

factor to the population's viability. We find it extremely unlikely that impacts from hunting and trapping will prevent genetic exchange to the extent that current diversity levels in the GYA are threatened (again, genetic diversity is not a conservation issue at this time, so a short term reduction in exchange would have no meaningful impact). Similarly, a peer review panel commissioned by the Service concluded "genetic concerns (inbreeding, maintenance of gene flow) are minor" and that "gene flow is likely to be adequate in the short- and medium-term" (Atkins 2012, p. iii). Overall, the best scientific and commercial information available indicates Idaho's 2012-2013 hunting and trapping season is unlikely to cause impacts to genetic connectivity that could undermine the Wyoming, the GYA, or the NRM gray wolf population's recovered status.

Nevertheless, the Service and the States will continue to monitor this issue long-term including the continuous collection of genetic samples, testing samples every 3 to 5 years to search for dispersers and their offspring as well as to detect losses in heterozygosity and changes in allele frequency. If monitoring results indicate remedial actions are needed, changes in management regulations (e.g., the timing and intensity of human-caused mortality) could then be instituted. As genetic diversity is not a short-term issue, we believe this approach is acceptable. (Groen *et al.* 2008, p. 2; WGFC 2011, pp. 26–29; WGFC 2012, pp. 6–7)

- The hunting season was extended on private land in the Panhandle zone from Aug 30 – March 31 (2011-2012) to July 1 - March 31 (2012-2013). As of August 14, 2012, no wolves had been harvested during the current season (J. Rachael 2012, pers. comm.) Additionally, despite seasons in the Lolo and Selway zones lasting 3 months longer (Aug 30 – June 30) than all other zones (Aug 30 – Mar 31) in 2011-2012, only 2 wolves were harvested during that extended period (J. Rachael 2012, pers. comm.). The change may expose pups in some packs to harvest, however, we don't foresee it having a significant impact on the larger population.
- Idaho also extended trapping into 2 additional game management units (part of the McCall-Weiser wolf zone) due to limited access and low hunter success in the 2011-2012 hunting season. While harvest in this area may increase due to trapping, the remote backcountry location will continue to limit access; therefore this change will likely have limited impact on harvest.
- Idaho also increased the harvest limit in Southern Mountains zone from 25 (2011-2012) to 40 wolves (2012-2013). The harvest limit of 25 was not met in 2011-2012 (total harvest was 24) (J. Rachel, pers. Comm.) The bag limit (2 wolves per individual) in this zone did not change. Given the above, we see no reason to conclude that this year's higher quota to be met either. No changes were made to limits in any other zones. Limits exist in 5 of 13 zones, including Salmon, Sawtooth, Southern Mountains, Beaverhead, and Island Park.

The 2012-2013 wolf hunting regulations are consistent with the Service approved Idaho Wolf Conservation and Management Plan. The Plan states that IDFG will manage for a population above 150 wolves and above 15 breeding pairs, which is 50 percent above the minimum recovery goals for Idaho (at least 100 wolves and at least 10 breeding pairs) (Idaho Fish and Game Commission 2012). Idaho continues to indicate that their goal is to manage a sustainable wolf population and maintain state management authority (thus, their continued commitment to meet or exceed their minimum management targets) while addressing, conflicts, including those with humans, livestock, domestic animals, and other big game (Idaho Fish and Game Commission 2012).

Idaho documented a minimum of 746 wolves and 40 breeding pairs at the end of 2011 despite a harvest of 200 wolves up to that point in the 2011-2012 season (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service et al. 2012, Idaho chapter). Another 179 wolves were harvested in Idaho during the 2012 portion of the 2011-2012 hunting and trapping season (J. Rachael 2012, pers. comm.) This suggests a minimum population over 550 wolves likely existed going into the 2012 wolf breeding season, which is far above the minimum management goal (at least 150 wolves and at least 15 breeding pairs). We expect the more liberal 2012-2013 regulations to produce higher mortality rates and a steeper population decline, but given that the population low point going into this breeding season is several times the minimum management target (at least 150 wolves and at least 15 breeding pairs), it is unlikely that the regulations will cause the population to drop below that target in one year. However, if regulations continue to become liberalized and the population drops closer to minimum levels, we expect Idaho to institute safeguards, such as a statewide harvest limit and rigorous monitoring techniques that accurately reflect changes in population size (see Service commissioned review by S. Mills in Atkins 2012, pp.65-66 for importance and consequences of monitoring techniques).

Finally, as committed to in the post-delisting monitoring portion of our 2009 delisting rule, around April 1, we will publish an annual analysis of the State's annual wolf population reports and the status of the region's wolf population. This assessment will consider the numbers of packs, breeding pairs, and total number of wolves in mid-winter by State and by recovery area as well as any changes in threats. Because this analysis will be conducted after official 2012 population data are available, the analysis will allow us to take into account the 2012 portion of the 2012-2013 hunting and trapping season and provide a more complete assessment of the impact of Idaho's hunting and trapping season.

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