

Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery 2009 Interagency Annual Report

A cooperative effort by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Nez Perce Tribe, National Park Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Idaho Fish and Game, Blackfeet Nation, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and USDA Wildlife Services



Photo by FWP Volunteer Erika Edgley

This cooperative annual report presents information on the status, distribution and management of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf population from January 1, 2009 to December 31, 2009.

It is also available at:

<http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov/annualreports.htm>

This report may be copied and distributed as needed.

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Note to Readers:

Because of delisting and state-led wolf management in Montana and Idaho, the 2009 Interagency Annual Report is comprised of separate sections, one each for the individual annual reports from the states of Montana and Idaho, federal agencies for Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park combined, and the overall U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northern Rockies Recovery Program. This makes for some degree of overlap and duplication between sections. However, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requires Montana and Idaho to submit an annual report each year. By incorporating their state annual reports in this modified structure, the public can still access information about gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains in a single, comprehensive report or by individual state.

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. I hope you find this format useful.

Thank you,

Ed Bangs

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Northern Rockies Wolf Recovery Program Coordinator

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NORTHERN ROCKIES WOLF SUMMARY 2009

Abstract- The 2009 NRM wolf population increased over 2008 levels and now includes at least 1,706 wolves in 242 packs and 115 breeding pairs. Wolf packs and especially breeding pairs largely remain within the core recovery areas, but for the first time breeding pairs were confirmed in eastern Washington and Oregon. Agency control, hunting, other causes of mortality, and the natural territorial behavior of wolves slowed population growth to less than 4 percent in 2009, the lowest growth rate since 1995. In 2009 Federal agencies spent \$3,763,000 for wolf management. Private and state agencies paid \$457,785 in compensation for wolf-damage to livestock in 2009. Confirmed cattle losses in 2009 (192) were lower than in 2008 (214), but confirmed sheep losses (721) and dog losses (24) were higher than in 2008 (355 and 14 respectively). Montana removed 145 wolves by agency control and 72 by hunting. Idaho removed 93 by agency control and 134 by hunting. In Wyoming, 32 wolves were removed by agency control. In Oregon two wolves were removed by agency control. No wolves were controlled in Washington or Utah. Wolves in the NRM, except in Wyoming, were removed from the list of endangered species on May 4, 2009. That decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is being litigated in both Wyoming and Montana Federal District Courts.

NRM Wolf Population- The NRM wolf population increased in 2009. On December 31, 2009 the gray wolf population in the Northern Rocky Mountain (NRM) Distinct Population Segment (DPS) (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of northcentral Utah) was estimated to have at least 1,706 wolves in 242 wolf packs, and 115 breeding pairs, more than were estimated in 2008 (1,645 wolves; 217 packs; and 95 breeding pairs respectively). The overall distribution of the NRM wolf packs also increased (Figure 1). At the end of 2009 we estimated there were at least 319 wolves in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area (NWMT), 455 in the Greater Yellowstone Recovery Area (GYA), and 913 in the Central Idaho Recovery Area (CID)(Figure 1, Table 4a). Within the NRM DPS by state boundaries, there were an estimated minimum of 524 wolves in Montana, 320 in Wyoming, 843 in Idaho (Table 4b). Five wolves were in eastern Washington and 14 in eastern Oregon (Tables 6 & 7). Of approximately 242 packs (groups of 2 or more wolves with territories persisting until Dec. 31, 2009), 115 packs met the definition of “breeding pair,” (packs containing at least one adult male and one adult female and 2 or more pups on December 31) (Tables 4a, 4b). Minimum recovery goals (an equitably distributed NRM wolf population that never goes below 100 wolves and 10 breeding pairs in Montana, in Idaho, and in Wyoming) have been exceeded in the NRM DPS every year since 2002 (Table 4b). Wolves in the NRM DPS, except in Wyoming, were delisted in 2009. As the wolf population expands our minimum estimate becomes less accurate because our field efforts have been relatively stable for the past few years. However, our estimate of the NRM wolf population it is still a very accurate compared to most estimates of wildlife population density and distribution in North America.

Wolf Packs in NRM- The NRM had 242 confirmed wolf packs at the end of 2009. Montana had 111 wolf packs present at some point in 2009 but 10 packs (9% of all packs present in 2009) were gone by the end of 2009 (Table 1). In Wyoming, 44 packs were present in 2009 but 7 (16% of all packs present in 2009) were gone by year’s end (Table 2). In Idaho, 102 wolf packs were present but 8 packs (9% of all packs present in 2009) were gone by year’s end (Table 3). Agency control was responsible for most (64%) of the packs that did not persist. One out of 3

packs in Oregon was gone by year's end when both its members repeatedly depredated and were removed. Only one pack was documented in Washington in 2009. No packs were documented in Utah (Table 6).

Wolf Depredations in NRM- Wolf depredation increased in 2009. Wolves in the NRM DPS subsist mainly on elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, and moose, but livestock are also attacked. Although wolf depredation results in a comparatively small proportion of all livestock losses in the NRM DPS, wolf damage can be significant to some livestock producers. Confirmed livestock depredations by wolves in 2009 included 214 cattle, 721 sheep, 24 dogs, and 7 other livestock (4 llamas and 4 goats) (Tables 5a, 5b, 5c). Approximately of 81 out of 267 NRM wolf packs that existed in 2009 (30%) were involved in at least one confirmed livestock or pet depredation, 25 (10%) of those packs no longer existed by the end of 2009, often (64%) because of agency control of depredating wolves. In response to depredations, 272 wolves were lethally removed.

Agency control of wolves in the NRM- Agency control in Montana removed the largest and Wyoming the smallest percentage of its wolf population in 2009. For strictly comparative purposes we estimated the absolute minimum number of wolves alive in 2009 by combining the at least 1,706 wolves living on Dec 31, and by adding all known wolf mortality (272 by agency control, 206 by hunting, and 108 by all other known causes (illegal, accidental, and natural which are all obviously under-reported and do not usually include mortality of young pups). This absolute minimum estimated population of 2,292 wolves in 2009 in MT (779), ID (1,115), WY (377), WA (5) and OR (16) was only used to compare the relative rates of wolf removal between states and by cause. A total of 272 wolves (12% of the minimum NRM population) was removed by agency control in 2009 (145 in Montana, 32 in Wyoming, 93 in Idaho, and 2 in Oregon) (Table 5b & 5c). In 2009 agency authorized control (which included legal take by private citizens in defense of their private property- 11 in MT, 6 in ID, and 0 in WY) removed 19% of the estimated minimum wolf population in Montana; 8% in Wyoming; 8% in Idaho; and 12% in Oregon.

Public Hunting of Wolves in the NRM- Fair-chase hunting removed a maximum of 9% of the minimum estimated 2009 NRM wolf population. Montana set a maximum wolf hunting quota of 75 wolves and Idaho set a quota of 220 wolves. A total of 206 wolves were legally harvested by hunters in 2009 (72 in Montana and 134 in Idaho). Hunters bought \$749,196 in tags for the opportunity to hunt a single wolf in Montana (\$325,916 for 15,603 tags) and Idaho (\$423,280 for 26,428 tags). Hunting removed a maximum of 5% in Montana and 12% in Idaho of each state's minimum estimated wolf population.

Human-caused Wolf Mortality by State and Cause- Montana had the highest rate of known human-caused mortality on wolves and Wyoming the lowest in 2009. Agency control (145) and hunting (72) removed 28% of the minimum estimated wolf population in Montana. In Idaho, hunting (134) and control (93) removed 20% of the minimum estimated wolf population. In Wyoming 9% of the minimum wolf population was removed by agency control (32). Wolf hunting was not allowed in Wyoming, Washington, Oregon, or Utah. In addition, past research on radio-collared wolves from 1984-2004 (Smith et al. 2010) indicated roughly 26 out of every 100 adult-sized wolves died annually. On average about 10 of them were killed by agency

control, 10 by illegal killing, 3 were killed accidentally by people (mainly vehicle collisions) and 3 by natural causes (mainly wolf-to-wolf conflict and disease/parasites).

Wolf Funding- The cost of wolf management in the NRM DPS increased in Federal Fiscal Year 2009 (Oct 1, 2009-Sept 30, 2010). Federal agencies spent \$3,763,000, including \$1,123,000 spent by USDA WS to investigate reports of suspected wolf damage and to control problem wolves. In 2009, \$457,785 was paid by private and state compensation programs for confirmed, probable, and likely livestock damage caused by NRM wolves. In 2009, \$141,462 in compensation for wolf damage was paid in Montana, \$233,271 in Idaho, \$78,352 in Wyoming, and \$4,700 in Oregon. In FY 2010, an estimated \$4,206,000 in federal funding will be spent for wolf management in the NRM.

Wolf Population Recovery- By every biological measure the NRM wolf population is fully recovered. Resident packs now appear to saturate suitable habitat in the core recovery areas and dispersing wolves routinely travel between them and breed. Consequently, genetic diversity in the NRM remains very high. The 3 subpopulations function as a single large NRM meta-population (Figure 1). Lone dispersing wolves travel beyond the core recovery areas and have gone into most adjacent states. Numerous research projects are underway examining: wolf population dynamics, predator-prey interactions, wolf interactions with other wildlife species, wolf diseases and parasites, possible wolf-caused trophic cascades, and livestock depredation by wolves. Biological restoration of wolves to the NRM has been completed. Numerous scientific papers were published about wolves in the NRM. State, tribal, and USFWS management will maintain a fully recovered wolf population in the delisted areas of the NRM DPS. State and tribal management should help reduce conflicts and damage to livestock and pets, and will continue to implement the transition into a more efficient, sustainable, and cost-effective wildlife conservation model. However, controversy will remain high because of the strong symbolism that humans ascribe to wolves.

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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 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 depredation were relocated to Yellowstone National Park. They were released from their holding pen in spring 1997.

The NRM DPS (Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, the eastern one-third of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of northcentral Utah) contains 3 core recovery areas: the NWMT (Figs. 1, 2) includes northern Montana and the northern Idaho panhandle; the GYA (Figs. 1, 3) includes Wyoming and adjacent parts of Idaho and Montana; the CID (Figs. 1, 4) includes central Idaho and adjacent parts of southwest Montana. Wolf packs were also documented adjacent to CID in eastern Oregon and Washington for the first time in 2009 (Figs. 1, 7 and Tables 6 & 7). Wolves in the NRM DPS, except for in Wyoming were delisted in 2009 and are managed by the respective states and tribes. Wolves in Wyoming remained protected under the Endangered Species act by the 1994 experimental population rules and continue to be managed by the USFWS.