

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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GRAY WOLF RECLASSIFIED TO THREATENED LIST IN MINNESOTA

The Minnesota population of the gray wolf has been reclassified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from the endangered species category to that of a threatened species, following public comment on a rulemaking proposal issued June 9, 1977.

Associate Director Keith M. Schreiner said the reclassification reflects the increase in numbers, extension of the animal's range in northern Minnesota, and the fact that it is no longer in danger of extinction in that part of its range.

"Endangered" means that a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. "Threatened" means that a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a portion of its range.

The reclassification to threatened will allow a limited killing of wolves which prey on domestic animals, when necessary, by authorized State or Federal agents. The wolf population in Minnesota was estimated at about 1,200 in 1976.

To assist in the administration of the Endangered Species Act, this rulemaking also discards the following subspecies names from the endangered species list: the Mexican wolf, Rocky Mountain timber wolf, eastern timber wolf, and Texas gray wolf. Instead the entire species of gray wolf is listed as endangered throughout Mexico and all the "lower 48" States except in Minnesota. The prior listing arrangement was unsatisfactory since the classification of wolves is out of date and wolves wander outside recognized subspecies boundaries. In Alaska the gray wolf is not listed because its population is numerous and healthy in the wild, numbering an estimated 10,000. In addition, critical habitat in Michigan (Isle Royale National Park only) and Minnesota are determined.

In the past, wolves attacking livestock in Minnesota have been dealt with by live trapping and relocating. Detailed studies of the relocated animals, however, indicate that once removed from its own territory and relocated onto another wolf pack's turf, the lone newcomer may be subjected to fatal attacks by the resident pack.

The regulation establishes five zones in Minnesota for wolf management, with the first three zones consisting of 9,827 square miles in the northern part of the State determined as critical habitat. The wolf will be afforded an area where no killing may occur in its prime range--the 4,462 square miles

(over)

of zone 1. In the other zones, wolves may be killed if they commit significant attacks on lawfully present domestic animals. Killing may only be carried out by authorized Federal or State employees.

The wolf in Minnesota has been a subject of controversy for the last several years because of a reported increase in numbers and extension of range to settled areas. On October 4, 1974, the State petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to exclude the wolf from the endangered category.

In response, the Service initiated a review on November 21, 1974. Further actions were withheld until the Recovery Team formulated its plan for the animal. In late 1976 the Recovery Team--composed of State, Federal, and academic wolf specialists--recommended reclassification and management.

The current rulemaking is based largely on the Recovery Team's recommendations and relevant public comments.

A breakdown of the public comments on the proposal for this rulemaking shows the following figures: 637 persons sent individual comments and 380 signed petitions in support of maintaining the endangered classification of the wolf in Minnesota; 84 persons sent individual comments, 28 signed petitions, and 214 signed form letters supporting total declassification in Minnesota; 99 persons sent individual comments and 214 signed form letters expressing opposition to what they termed a "sanctuary" in Minnesota; 129 persons signed a form letter suggesting that the proposed depredation control measures were inadequate; 7 persons sent comments supporting the proposal; and 9 persons sent information without actually expressing a viewpoint.

The State of Minnesota called for complete declassification of the wolf in that State on the grounds that its population has reached carrying capacity in many areas and was expanding into areas "not heretofore inhabited." The Service believes, however, that at one time the wolf did occupy the entire State, and although its population may have reached carrying capacity in some parts of Minnesota, these areas represent a comparatively small portion of the original range of the species and population density alone will not assure long-term welfare.

The critical habitat designated by this rulemaking is virtually the same as that originally proposed. However, at the request of the National Park Service, approximately 13 square miles in Voyageurs National Park and about 13 square miles outside the park have been added to zone 1--the zone affording wolves maximum protection. A reduction of about 8 square miles in the size of zone 2 also has been made based on new information provided by the Fish and Wildlife Service's office in Twin Cities.

The Fish and Wildlife Service feels that the special regulations being established in Minnesota are necessary and advisable for the future well being of the species. Although an increased legal take of wolves committing depredations on domestic animals will be authorized, it is hoped that this action will reduce present conflict between the wolf and human interests. Such conflict would hinder conservation efforts and thus work against the long-term welfare of the wolf.