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News Release



February 2, 2006

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SERVICE ANNOUNCES INTENT TO REMOVE THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN POPULATION OF GRAY WOLVES FROM ENDANGERED SPECIES LIST

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced an advanced notice of proposed rulemaking that outlines the agency's intent to remove gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains from the Federal list of threatened and endangered species.

The advance notice of proposed rulemaking is being issued in order to give the public time to review and comment on the Service's proposed strategy of designating and proposing to delist a distinct population segment (DPS) of wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains that have exceeded biological recovery goals and no longer require protection under the Endangered Species Act. As part of a future rulemaking, the Service intends to propose establishing a gray wolf DPS, encompassing the geographic boundary of all of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming, the eastern third of Washington and Oregon, and a small part of north-central Utah.

If this advanced notice of proposed rulemaking were implemented, wolves outside the boundaries of the DPS in other parts of the country would continue to be listed as endangered, except for the Mexican gray wolf in Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico, which is listed as an experimental, non-essential population. The Service anticipates publishing a proposal to establish and delist a Great Lakes DPS of gray wolves, which has also exceeded its recovery goals, in the near future.

In making the announcement, Service Director H. Dale Hall emphasized that any future rulemaking on a delisting decision for Rocky Mountain wolves is still contingent on the State of Wyoming implementing a Service-approved state law and wolf management plan, as required under the Endangered Species Act.

"Gray wolves in the Northern Rockies have exceeded their recovery goals and are biologically ready to be delisted," Hall said. "However, the potential delisting cannot be finalized until Wyoming's wolf management plan has been approved. We are hopeful that Wyoming will be able to develop a state law and management plan which meets the Service's criteria for approval."

The Service has worked in partnership with state and local governments, Indian tribes, other federal agencies, conservation organizations and private landowners to manage wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains and reduce or eliminate threats to their populations. The wolf population has flourished there, exceeding recovery goals each year since 2002.

The minimum recovery goal for wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains is 30 breeding pairs and at least 300 wolves for three consecutive years, a goal that was attained in 2002. The most recent official population counts in 2004 found that Montana had 15 breeding pairs and approximately 153 wolves; Wyoming had 24 breeding pairs and approximately 260 wolves; and Idaho had 27 breeding pairs and 422 wolves. Official population estimates for 2005 are not yet available but are expected to be slightly higher than last year.

Wolves dispersed naturally from Canada into northwestern Montana in the early 1980s. In 1995 and 1996, the Service reintroduced wolves from southwestern Canada to remote public lands in central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park. These wolves were classified as nonessential experimental populations under section 10(j) of the ESA to increase management flexibility and address local and State concerns. Natural dispersal coupled with reintroductions and the accompanying management programs greatly expanded the numbers and distribution of wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains.

If the northern Rocky Mountain DPS is delisted in future rules, the individual states and Tribes will resume sole management of wolves within their respective boundaries. Montana and Idaho have adopted state laws and wolf management plans, approved by the Service, to conserve their share of a recovered northern Rocky Mountain wolf population into the foreseeable future. Wyoming's law and its wolf management plan have not been approved by the Service.

Consistent with regulatory requirements, the Department of Interior and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have previously transferred much of the Federal management responsibilities to the States of Montana and Idaho. The two States now implement control actions for problem wolves, monitor wolf packs, coordinate research, conduct public information programs and take wolves for scientific and other purposes in accordance with federal regulations.

Important elements of the Idaho and Montana management frameworks are adequate regulatory mechanisms to manage the human take of wolves, consistent definitions of a "pack," and agreement to manage for 15 packs in each state.

Wyoming's state law and wolf management plan have not been approved by the Service in part because Wyoming's law defines wolves as a "predatory animal," which means that wolves can be killed at any time, by anyone, without limit, and by any means except poisoning. Concerns regarding Wyoming state law and its plan must be resolved before the northern Rocky Mountain DPS proposed delisting regulation can progress.

The Service reclassified gray wolf populations in 2003 from endangered to threatened for much of the species' current range in the United States and proposed to delist the eastern population of wolves in 2004. Both the reclassification and the proposed delisting were overturned by Federal courts last year. The Service continues to believe reclassification is both biologically and legally sound. The advanced notice of proposed rulemaking for anticipated delisting seeks to comply with the courts' rulings, while recognizing, as the courts did, that the northern Rocky Mountains and Great Lakes wolf populations have reached the recovery goals necessary for delisting.

Comments from the public on the Service's intent to propose to establish a distinct population segment and to delist the wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains should be mailed to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Western

Gray Wolf Recovery Coordinator, 585 Shepard Way, Helena, MT 59601. Comments are required to be submitted by close of business 60 days after the Federal Register publication date.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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