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FINAL RULES CLEAR THE WAY FOR WOLF REINTRODUCTION IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK AND CENTRAL IDAHO

Gray wolves, absent for nearly 60 years, are to once again inhabit the wilds of Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho as the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prepares to reintroduce wolves in the two areas. The Service has completed the final administrative step required for wolf reintroduction by publishing final rules in the November 22 Federal Register.

Radio-collaring and capture of wolves in Canada for relocation to the park and to national forest land in central Idaho will begin immediately.

The rules, one for the Yellowstone National Park area and one for central Idaho, describe how wolves will be reintroduced and managed in the two areas and are designed to meet public concerns about having wolves in the region. Those concerns represent part of a wide range of public opinion expressed during the development of an environmental impact statement on wolf reintroduction.

"This historic step in wolf recovery is an excellent example of how the Endangered Species Act can help speed a species' comeback," said George Frampton, Jr., Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "By using the act's experimental population provision, we were able to work with all interested parties to find a way to bring wolves back, while taking into account the concerns of the people who will be most directly affected by reintroduction."

Wolves reintroduced in Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho will be classified as "nonessential, experimental" populations, allowing Federal, state, and Tribal resource agencies and private citizens greater flexibility in managing the new populations, an option not possible under the Endangered Species Act if wolves repopulate the area on their own. Such management could involve the taking of some wolves when necessary in order to protect livestock.

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In the next few weeks, Fish and Wildlife Service biologists, working closely with their counterparts in Alberta and possibly British Columbia, will begin radio-collaring wolves to locate packs. Once identified, about 30 wild wolves (15 for each recovery area) will be captured, examined by veterinarians, and transported to sites in Yellowstone National Park's Lamar Valley or remote wilderness areas in central Idaho. Additional releases will be conducted during the next 3 to 5 years.

"The process has been a long one," said Mollie Beattie, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "but I feel that everyone interested in wolves, for whatever reason, has had an opportunity to participate, enabling us to develop a plan that will both restore wolves and respond to public concerns."

Changes to the draft rules, which were proposed in August 1994, include providing greater flexibility for private citizens to harass wolves on private land or to kill wolves seen attacking livestock, a provision that reintroduced wolves will be removed if the final rules are not implemented as written, assurances that states and Tribes will manage wolves to achieve recovery, a slight adjustment to the northern boundary of the Idaho experimental population area, and an open scientific review of the program's success within 3 years.

The final details included in the rules were a direct result of comments obtained at six public hearings held around the Nation in September, along with more than 400 written comments received in response to the proposed rules. In all, during the 3-year process to develop a plan for wolf reintroduction, 120 public hearings, meetings, and open houses were held and more than 170,000 comments were received.

On private property within the experimental areas, landowners may kill wolves in the act of wounding or killing livestock but are required to report the incident within 24 hours, and physical evidence of the attack is required. The final rules also allow private-property owners and livestock owners with grazing leases on public land to harass wolves without injuring them in order to discourage conflicts with domestic animals. Again, those owners are required to report such incidents.

The killing of wolves on public land by private citizens in the experimental area requires a permit and will be an option only after attempts to relocate problem wolves have failed and after six wolf packs have been established.

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Two different release techniques will be used and evaluated for future reintroductions. In Yellowstone, groups of adults and their offspring will be placed in 1-acre enclosures for up to 2 months to allow them to acclimate to the area within the park. Before release, the wolves will be fitted with radio collars, allowing biologists to track their movements.

The animals to be released in central Idaho will be wolves of assorted age groups from various packs, fitted with radio collars and freed as soon as possible after arriving at the release site. This technique, which does not include an acclimation period, will be used in Idaho because the remote release site's rough terrain makes access and logistical arrangements extremely difficult. In addition, the region's steep valleys are expected to keep wolves within the release area. After becoming oriented to their new surroundings, the released wolves are expected to mimic the way wolf packs naturally form. It is hoped they will disperse, find mates, and form packs, primarily within the 12 million acres of national forest land in central Idaho.

Under the rules, the "experimental population" designation will apply to any wolves found in the State of Wyoming, a portion of southeast Idaho east of Interstate 15, and a portion of Montana east of Interstate 15 and south of the Missouri River. In central Idaho, the experimental population area includes all of Idaho south of Interstate 90 and west of Interstate 15 and portions of Montana south of Interstate 90 beginning at Missoula, Montana, and west of Interstate 15.

Gray wolves began declining in the American West around 1870 as populations of animals they preyed on, such as bison, deer, and elk, diminished in response to human settlement and the demand for hides and meat. Settlers and government trappers, fearing for the safety of livestock, carried out intensive campaigns to eradicate wolves. By the late 1920s, wolves and their prey had been virtually eliminated from the Rocky Mountain area. With the exception of a population in Minnesota, gray wolves eventually disappeared from the lower 48 states. Wolves were listed as endangered in 1973.

Wolves moving south from Canada began appearing in Montana in the 1980s, and it is generally believed by many that they will eventually repopulate the northern Rocky Mountains. However, reintroduction could speed the process. As part of efforts prescribed in the 1987 Northern Rocky Mountain Gray Wolf Recovery Plan, reintroduction was recommended in several areas, including Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho.

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Under the reintroduction plan, wolves could reach recovery levels by 2002. Wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains would be considered recovered when 10 breeding pairs and their offspring, or about 100 wolves, are established in each of three recovery areas (northwest Montana, central Idaho, and the Yellowstone National Park area). There are currently about 65 wolves in northwestern Montana.

In 1991, Congress instructed the Fish and Wildlife Service to complete an environmental impact statement on wolf reintroduction in the two areas. The record of decision on the environmental impact statement, which recommended reintroduction using the "non-essential, experimental" population provisions, was signed in June 1994.

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