NEWS
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GRAY WOLVES MAKING A STRONG COMEBACK;
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE TAKING A NEW LOOK AT THEIR STATUS

Once hunted nearly to extinction, the gray wolf has rebounded so well in the lower 48 states that the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will propose to remove some gray wolf populations from the endangered species list and to reclassify others, Secretary Bruce Babbitt announced today during a news conference at the Wildlife Science Center in Forest Lake, Minnesota.

"Few animals have ever haunted our dreams or fired our imaginations more than the wolf," said Secretary Babbitt. "Unfortunately, by the early part of this century, man had almost exterminated the wolf from the lower 48 states. Now, in Minnesota and elsewhere, the recovery of the wolf is becoming an impressive conservation success story and a gift to future generations. I believe it's time to stand back and take a close look at wolf populations throughout the country and to carefully consider if all of the wolves still need the same level of special protection under the Endangered Species Act."

"The Fish and Wildlife Service intends to publish a proposed rule to delist or reclassify specific wolf populations where appropriate," said Service Director Jamie Rappaport Clark.

Clark said that consultation with states, Tribes, and others involved in wolf conservation and management will occur as the Service prepares an official proposal, which it plans to publish in the Federal Register this winter. The proposal will include a lengthy public comment period. Changes in the wolf's legal status are not likely to occur before 1999.

Gray wolves in the Midwest and portions of the East will be proposed for removal from the endangered species list. There

are an estimated 2,500 gray wolves in the Great Lakes area, primarily in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, which exceeds the number established as the recovery goal set for the species in this region. If the wolf is ultimately delisted, the states and Native American Tribes would assume responsibility for wolf management and conservation.

In the Rocky Mountains, there are approximately 235 wolves. This includes naturally occurring wolves in northwest Montana, numbering about 85, and reintroduced wolves in Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, which now total about 150. The reintroduced wolves have been nearly doubling their population annually. Rocky Mountain wolves are all listed as "endangered," but the reintroduced population is considered an "experimental, non-essential population" which enables more flexible management activities. Clark said that Rocky Mountain wolves will be proposed for reclassification from endangered to the less dire status of "threatened." If this ultimately occurs, the special rules for managing the reintroduced wolves would remain in place.

Wolf conservation and recovery in the Southwest took a major step forward this spring when captive-bred Mexican wolves were reintroduced to restore their populations in Arizona and New Mexico. Mexican wolves have not yet reached recovery goals and are not being considered for delisting or reclassification.

There is potential for wolf recovery in some areas of the Northeast where suitable habitat and prey species remain. In view of the recovery potential, the wolf will remain under the protection of the Endangered Species Act but will be proposed for reclassification to threatened in the Northeast.

Clark attributed the wolf's comeback to a combination of scientific research, conservation and management programs, and education efforts that helped increase public understanding of wolves. Successful reintroduction and management programs greatly accelerated wolf recovery in the Rocky Mountains. Restoration of wolf prey species such as deer, elk, and moose; science-based management; and habitat and legal protection all have allowed gray wolf populations to greatly expand their numbers and distribution.

Clark praised states, Native American Tribes, private organizations, and individuals who have worked together as partners to promote wolf recovery. "Together, we have developed innovative methods to reduce impacts to the livestock industry. One very successful program is administered by Defenders of Wildlife, which compensates ranchers for livestock that are proven wolf kills. We have also used the flexibility in the Endangered Species Act to allow us to manage wolves more effectively as populations rebounded," Clark said.

If a species' status under the Endangered Species Act is changed to either endangered or threatened, the species remains under Federal protection. If wolves are removed from the list, management then becomes the responsibility of the state or Native American Tribe where the population is located. However, the Service monitors delisted populations for at least 5 years following removal from the list and provides technical assistance or other management guidance, if requested.

"This program is like an emergency room and a recovery ward in a hospital. Once the patient's trauma is past and recovery is progressing well, it's time for the patient to get on with life," Babbitt said. "We are at that point with some of our wolf populations. Our goal is not to keep them in the hospital indefinitely. Perpetual protection is not the goal; seeing species reach the point that they can survive in the wild, on their own, is."

Red wolves, which have been reintroduced to eastern Tennessee and North Carolina, would not be affected by the review, nor would wolves in Alaska, which have never been Federally listed as endangered or threatened.

Before the arrival of European settlers, wolves ranged widely across the continent. Gray wolves were found throughout most of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with red wolves primarily inhabiting the southeastern United States.

In the United States, wolves were killed not only by individual settlers, fur traders, or hunters, but also subjected to organized government predator-control efforts. By the late 1920s, wolves were eradicated from the Rocky Mountains. Gray

wolves in the East were virtually eliminated with the exception of several hundred animals in Minnesota. Mexican wolves also vanished from the wild in the southwestern United States. The last remaining red wolves were removed from the wild for captive breeding in the 1970s; they survive in the wild today only through reintroduction programs.

The gray wolf was among the first species to be officially considered endangered under the first Federal endangered species law in 1967. Currently, it is listed as endangered throughout its historic range in the lower 48 states, except in Minnesota where it is listed as threatened. (An endangered species is considered to be in danger of extinction; a threatened species is one that is likely to become endangered.) Reintroduced populations such as those in Yellowstone and central Idaho and Arizona are listed as "non-essential, experimental," which permits more flexible management for those populations.

The Fish and Wildlife Service posts information about the various gray wolf populations at graywolfmail@mail.fws.gov, http://www.r6.fws.gov/wolf, http://ifw2es.fws.gov/wolf/, and http://www.fws.gov/r3pao/wolf/ on the Internet. Individuals and organizations wanting to be placed on the Service's mailing list to obtain updates on the wolf's status can write U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Gray Wolf Review, 1 Federal Drive, Fort Snelling, MN 55111-4056 or use either the http://www.fws.gov/r3pao/wolf/ or graywolfmail@mail.fws.gov Internet address. Individuals may also call the Service's gray wolf information line at 612-713-7337.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service's nearly 93 million acres include 514 national wildlife refuges, 78 ecological services field stations, 66 national fish hatcheries, 50 wildlife coordination areas, and 38 wetland management districts with waterfowl production areas.

The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, administers the Endangered Species Act, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes Federal excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies. This program is a cornerstone of the Nation's wildlife management efforts, funding fish and wildlife restoration, boating access, hunter education, shooting ranges, and related projects across America.

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