



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Nevada Fish & Wildlife Office
1340 Financial Blvd. #234
Reno, NV 89502
775-861-6300

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 18, 2002

CONTACTS: Randi Thompson-775-861-6319
Chris Tollefson (Washington D.C) 202-219-8104

Background information is available at <http://pacific.fws.gov>

Gray Wolves Move Toward Recovery; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Reclassifies Some Wolves from Endangered to Threatened

A highly successful reintroduction program in the northern Rocky Mountains and a steadily growing gray wolf population in the western Great Lakes states have prompted the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to change the status of gray wolves in these areas from “endangered” to the less serious “threatened” designation under the Endangered Species Act.

The reclassification rule, which finalizes an action first proposed by the Service in 2000, also establishes three “Distinct Population Segments” (DPS) for gray wolves under the Endangered Species Act. The three DPSs encompass the entire historic range of the gray wolf in the lower 48 states and Mexico, and correspond to the three areas of the country where there are wolf populations and ongoing recovery activities.

“Wolves are coming back, and their new status highlights our progress toward recovering them across their range,” said Service Director Steve Williams. “Our action today gives us greater management flexibility for most gray wolf populations as we work toward the next step - removing gray wolf populations from the list of endangered and threatened species.”

Wolf populations in the Eastern and Western DPSs have achieved population goals for recovery, and Advance Notices of Proposed Rulemaking are being published concurrent with this reclassification rule to give the public notice that the Service will soon begin work to propose delisting these populations. The Western DPS includes all of Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho, along with Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada, northern Colorado, and northern Utah.

“The Service has no plans to reestablish the gray wolf in Nevada, nor to expand the Northern Rockies recovery program into Nevada,” says Steve Thompson, California – Nevada Operations Manager for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. “Wolves will remain a Federal responsibility, so Nevada will not be required to develop a wolf management plan. We will work with Wildlife Services and the Nevada Division of Wildlife to develop policies to address citizen’s concerns. “

Under the Endangered Species Act, endangered species are those that are currently in danger of extinction. Threatened species, which receive many of the same protections under the Act, are species that are considered likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. “Threatened” is a more appropriate classification than “endangered” for wolves outside the Southwest because recovery programs have succeeded in reducing threats to gray wolves and vastly increasing their numbers and range.

The threatened designation - which now applies to all gray wolves in the lower 48 states except for those in the Southwest - is accompanied by special rules to allow some take of wolves outside the experimental population areas in the northern Rocky Mountains. Under the Endangered Species Act, these rules provide options for removing wolves that cause problems for livestock owners and other people affected by wolf populations. Such rules are possible for threatened species but not for those designated as endangered. Wolves in experimental population areas in the northern Rocky Mountains are already covered by similar rules that remain in effect.

The Service will now begin the process of proposing to remove gray wolves in the western and eastern United States from the endangered and threatened species list, once the agency has determined that all recovery criteria for wolf populations in those areas have been met and sufficient protections remain in place to ensure sustainable populations.

Gray wolf numbers in the western Great Lakes – estimated at more than 2,445 in Minnesota, 323 in Wisconsin and 278 in Michigan – have climbed beyond recovery goals for wolves in the eastern United States. In the Rocky Mountains, there are an estimated 664 wolves in 44 packs in northwestern Montana, Idaho, and in and around Yellowstone National Park. This is the third year the population has been at or above 30 breeding pairs, meeting the recovery goals for number and distribution in the west.

“Only a few decades ago, wolves were well on their way to extinction in the lower 48 states,” Williams said. “Today, Americans can hear wolves howl in Yellowstone National Park or see their tracks in the snow in Michigan and Wisconsin. These sights and sounds are ours to experience because wolf recovery is being achieved in tandem with measures that help people co-exist with wolves. Giving stakeholders a voice in how we recover wolves has been the key to the remarkable progress of this species.”

To delist the wolf, various recovery criteria must be met, in addition to reaching population goals. Among those criteria are requirements to ensure continued survival of the gray wolf after delisting. This will be accomplished through management plans developed by the states and tribes. Once delisted, the species will no longer be protected by the Endangered Species Act. At that point, individual states and tribes will resume management of gray wolf populations, although the Service will conduct monitoring for five years after delisting to ensure that populations remain secure.

In addition to reclassifying gray wolves in most states from endangered to threatened, the final rule establishes three Distinct Population Segments for wolves. The Eastern Distinct Population Segment includes all Midwestern and Northeastern states, and the wolf populations in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The new rule did not change the status of wolves in Minnesota, where they were already listed as threatened.

The Southwestern Distinct Population Segment includes all of Arizona and New Mexico, southern Colorado and southern Utah, portions of western Texas and western Oklahoma, and Mexico. This DPS will retain the status of endangered; the nonessential experimental population designation in Arizona, New Mexico, and a small portion of Texas remains unchanged. This new rule does not affect the status or management of gray wolves in the Southwest.

The rule finalizing the reclassification of most gray wolves differs in several ways from the original proposal. Rather than delisting the gray wolf in all or parts of 30 states, as proposed, the final rule delists the gray wolf in all or parts of 16 states in the Southeast because that area is outside the historical range of the species. Also, the final rule combines proposed Distinct Population Segments in the western Great Lakes and the Northeast into one Eastern Distinct Population Segment.

Gray wolves once ranged throughout much of the North American continent and occupied most of the lower 48 states, except for some southeastern and mid-Atlantic states. Wolf populations in the United States began to decline as European settlers moved west. Some wolves were killed for their fur, but government predator-control efforts helped wipe out wolves in much of their historical range. By the 1920s, they were virtually gone from the lower 48 states except for a small population in Minnesota.

Intensive efforts to recover wolf populations began once wolves received protection under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Once they were protected from killing, wolf populations in the western Great Lakes states began to rebound by the mid-1980s. In the northern Rocky Mountains, wolves naturally dispersing from Canada began recolonizing areas in Montana by the 1980s, and Canadian wolves were captured and released in central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park in the mid-1990s.

In the Southwest, 74 wolves have been released into the wild in New Mexico and Arizona since gray wolf reintroduction in the Southwest began in January 1998. Of these, at least 21 remain free-ranging. Second generation wild-born gray wolf pups were produced for the first time in the Southwest in 2002.

Wolves are numerous in Alaska, where they were never listed as endangered or threatened.

The final rule reclassifying the gray wolf will be published in the *Federal Register*.

For more information on the gray wolf, visit <http://midwest.fws.gov/wolf> . To receive free updates on gray wolves, contact the Service at U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Gray Wolf Review, 1 Federal Drive, Fort Snelling, MN 55111-4056; e-mail graywolfmail@fws.gov or call the Gray Wolf Line at 612-713-7337.

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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 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource 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 governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies

Note to Editors: For gray wolf images go to <http://images.fws.gov> and type “gray wolf” in the search window

B-Roll will be delivered to assignment editors this morning.