

Understanding the



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The proposal begins the process of returning wolf management to the control of state and tribal

by STEVE GROOMS

Reclassification Controversy

In July of 2000,

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) announced a proposal to reclassify and delist gray wolves in much of the United States. The proposal is comprehensive, complicated and controversial. Its fate will have major impacts on wolf management.

How significant is this development? From a historical perspective, reclassification represents the third great milestone in gray wolf restoration.

The first was the decision to protect gray wolves as an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973. That decision reversed centuries of persecution and began a concerted effort to restore gray wolf populations in some of the lower 48 states. Wolf management passed from states to the federal government, and wolves gained full protection as members of an endangered species.

The second milestone was the decision to reintroduce wolves to the northern Rockies, specifically, wolves trapped in Canada and released into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho, and to introduce captive-bred Mexican wolves into a recovery area in the Southwest. These reintroductions took place in 1995, 1996 and 1998 under a special provision of the ESA that allowed for more management flexibility (meaning some wolves could be killed or moved if they proved troublesome).

The third milestone — the current proposed reclassification — is essentially a declaration by the FWS that wolf restoration has succeeded well enough in the western Great Lakes and northern Rockies to allow wolves to be reclassified, going from the

extremely protective status of endangered to the less protective threatened status (joining Minnesota wolves, already classified as threatened). The change grants managers increased flexibility to fine-tune management by region rather than adhering to a single national policy. The proposal begins the process of returning wolf management to the control of state and tribal governments.

Other provisions of the reclassification proposal include the following:

- Wolves in northeastern states would be classified as threatened, although there are no documented wolf populations in the Northeast. The intent of that provision is to favor wolf restoration in this region by granting managers additional management flexibility.
- Wolves in the Southwest, where restoration is proceeding slowly, would continue to be classified as endangered.
- Wolves in the Northwest that are outside Yellowstone and central Idaho recovery areas would lose full endangered status and could be subjected to lethal management. This provision has implications for wolves dispersing out of Yellowstone, Idaho and Canada into such states as Washington, Oregon or Colorado.
- Wolf restoration would continue in three geographic areas and could be initiated in the Northeast, but ESA protection would be removed for wolves in all or portions of 30 states where FWS managers believe there is no realistic prospect for wolf restoration.
- Gray wolves would be divided into four Distinct Population Segments (DPS) to permit managers to fine-tune programs according to regional realities, rather than trying to apply a single program to the species in different regions.

governments.

An informational meeting was held at the Northern Great Lakes Center in Ashland, Wisconsin on August 17, 2000 to discuss wolf reclassification. In attendance were (from left to right): Tom Doolittle, biologist, Bad River Band; Ron Refsnider, biologist, USFWS; Peter David, biologist, Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission; Erv Soulier, Manager, Bad River DNR; and John Leonard, Region 3 Native American Liaison, USFWS.

Kim Mitchell



- Wolf numbers may not yet be high enough to provide the margin of safety needed to create a resilient and fully restored population in an optimum number of areas.
- Some state wildlife management agencies remain so hostile to wolves that decades of restoration might be threatened by returning wolf management to them.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Perspectives

FWS managers did not make their proposal casually. They expected opposition and a possible court challenge, so they have scientific and legal support for the changes they propose.

The basic position of the FWS is that its goals with respect to gray wolf restoration can be achieved by establishing three or four populations across the species' historical range in the United States. The success of restoration in two of those areas

Critics and Proponents

Like most wolf management initiatives, this proposal has drawn critics. Like so many wolf controversies, it is almost surely headed for the court system. Several groups have declared their intention to fight the FWS proposal in court. Accordingly, probably no major change in the status of gray wolves will happen soon.

Who favors the proposal? State wildlife agencies generally want to manage wolves in their own territories, so they favor the proposed change because it moves in that direction. Livestock producers aren't enthusiastic about the proposal, because it offers less freedom for them to control depredating wolves than they would prefer, yet most of them regard it as a step in the right direction.

Who opposes this proposal? In public meetings on the proposal, virtually all opposition came from environmental and wolf advocacy groups. These groups have been pleased with the progress made on wolf restoration under ESA protection and federal management. They fear and disapprove of the proposed changes for several reasons.

In public hearings, wolf advocates made it clear that they want more wolves in more places under the greatest protection the ESA can offer. Some wolf advocates believe state fish

and game agencies in the West cannot be trusted to manage wolves, because they are vulnerable to pressures from hunters and livestock producers.

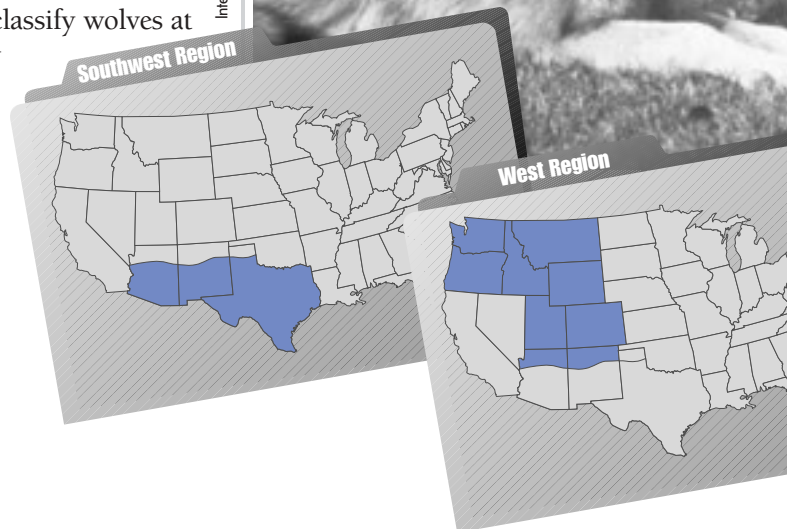
While critics of the reclassification proposal have many arguments, their legal challenge will concentrate on ways they believe this reclassification measure would fall short of meeting the ESA's requirements.

Critics feel this reclassification action is premature, because of the following beliefs:

- Much suitable wolf habitat is still available and might not ever become occupied if wolves are reclassified as proposed.
- The FWS redefined its population goals in the northern Rockies two years ago in ways that critics think are insufficiently ambitious and possibly not legal.
- The decision to reclassify wolves at this time probably means wolves are less likely to be reintroduced into the Northeast, the Olympic Peninsula of Washington, and other areas where wolf advocates hope to see them established.



International Wolf Center



(Western Great Lakes and Upper Rockies) is sufficient to both allow and oblige the FWS to consider reclassifying gray wolves.

In addition, FWS managers defend the reclassification proposal with the following points:

- The goal of the ESA is to prevent the extinction of individual species, not to restore biological communities or restore a species to all of its remaining suitable habitat. The ESA is not a national biodiversity act, even if it can promote that or other desirable conservation outcomes. The goals of recovery plans are intentionally designed to accomplish narrow, specific outcomes.
- The reason for putting a species on the ESA list is to restore its health so it can be taken off the list again; the status is not meant to offer permanent federal protection.
- The ESA requires FWS managers to base classifications on scientific fact; when a species is no longer endangered or threatened, its listing should reflect its true status.
- The ESA allows the FWS to “fine-tune” status designations according to regional groupings. The intention is to encourage

management flexibility that accurately reflects the health of a species that might be more threatened in one region than in another.

The ESA also requires federal managers to return species management to the state or tribal agencies that would normally manage them when their status no longer requires the intensive federal management protocols of the ESA.

The football game and the ICU

A critic of the proposal compared wolf restoration to a football game in which FWS plays a good game for two quarters so that the home team enjoys a good lead but, with two quarters left to go, wants to declare a victory and send in the scrubs to finish the game.

However, Ed Bangs, Wolf Recovery Coordinator for the Northwestern US sees it this way; According to Bangs, “The ESA is like the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of a hospital where you try to save the life of a species that is in imminent peril of extinction. If the patient makes progress toward health, it makes sense to move the patient out of ICU so you can devote your resources

This article provides a broad outline of the reclassification controversy. It is not possible here to summarize all the complications and nuances of biological and legal positions on this issue. Additional information can be found on the Internet Web sites listed below:

- For FWS perspective on wolf reclassification, see: “Questions and Answers About the Proposal to Reclassify/Delist the Gray Wolf,” at: <http://Midwest.fws.gov/wolf>.
- For a critique of these issues, see the Defenders of Wildlife Web site, at: <http://www.defenders.org>. Go to the “Wildlife Near You” and their “Wildlife At Risk” areas once you get to the site.
- For a slightly different perspective from the National Wildlife Federation, see: <http://www.nwf.org>.
- For an informational pamphlet by the International Wolf Center, “The Gray Wolf in Minnesota, Where Do We Stand?”, see: <http://www.wolf.org/learn/iwmag/1999/info-book/infobook.shtml>.

to all the other species that deserve and need that kind of urgent care.”

Federal managers think the time has come to recognize the great progress that has been made. Critics believe too much remains to be done to say that the conditions of the ESA have been met sufficiently to allow this reclassification. In the months to come, political and legal contests will define more precisely what the FWS must do to satisfy the requirements of the ESA with respect to gray wolf restoration. ■

Steve Grooms has been writing about wolf management since 1976. He is the author of a book, The Return of the Wolf, and an International Wolf Center educational pamphlet on reclassifying and declassifying issues in Minnesota, “The Gray Wolf In Minnesota: Where Do We Stand?”

The maps at left represent the four proposed distinct population segments for wolf reclassification.

