Wolf Facts

Protecting Wolves in the American West

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It's a wildlife success story: After an absence of more than 50 years, wolves were reintroduced into Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho in 1995 and 1996, and they now number roughly 1,600 individuals in the Northern Rockies. To many Americans, wolves represent wild nature that has been lost in many parts of the country. But these magnificent animals are once again at risk. The U.S. Department of the Interior's decision to remove Endangered Species Act protections—to "delist" wolves—threatens to return Northern Rocky Mountain wolves to the brink of extinction by allowing the states of Idaho and Montana to kill more than 500 wolves, and, conceivably, up to about 80 percent of the current wolf population in these two states.

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Wolf Delisting and the "Killing Rule"

The removal of wolves from the endangered species list would give Idaho and Montana a free pass to kill more than 500 gray wolves, just when wolves are making good progress toward recovery. (Wyoming's wolves would remain on the endangered species list because its management plan has not been approved). NRDC and conservation partners are preparing to file suit in federal court to block the Interior Department's decision and save hundreds of wolves from extermination by aerial gunning, hunting, baiting, and trapping.

Another change, made last year by the Bush administration, would make it possible for an excessive number of wolves to be killed in Wyoming, where federal protections will be maintained. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) adopted a revision to section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act, known as the "killing rule," which allows wolves to be eliminated if they are having an "unacceptable impact" on the number or distribution of elk. The fact that drought, shrinking habitat, other predators, and human hunting have been found to be the primary causes of elk herd changes became irrelevant under this rule. In effect, wolves can be exterminated for doing what they are supposed to do—maintain a healthy ecosystem by preying on elk.

The federal government has consistently failed to apply sound science to protect wolf populations. For the past five years, the federal government has been aggressively killing wolves, without attempting to solve the underlying conflicts with livestock that are prompting the slaughter of numerous wolf packs. NRDC and other conservation organizations are redoubling efforts to aid non-lethal, proactive programs to avoid wolf-livestock conflicts; but much more needs to be done by state and federal agencies.

Although independent biologists agree that 2,000 to 6,000 wolves are needed in the Northern Rockies for a healthy, viable wolf population, the Interior Department's decision to delist wolves would result in the killing of hundreds of wolves, setting back wolf recovery. And delisting Idaho and Montana wolves, while maintaining protections for Wyoming wolves, makes no ecological sense for a wide-ranging animal that cannot read maps. Further, this approach violates current FWS policy.

States Take Unnecessary and Extreme Steps to Eliminate Wolves

The wolf delisting rule affects two western states: Idaho and Montana. Each state has a different approach to managing wolves. The government is not delisting Wyoming's wolves at this time because it determined that the states' laws and plans are inadequate.

Idaho—The State of Idaho is home to more than 800 wolves. Idaho officials have approved a wolf hunt to kill over 300 wolves. Of the three states in the overall Northern Rockies wolf recovery zone, Idaho has the most habitat and the most wolves. Yet Idaho's official position on wolves is that there should be zero wolves in the state.[1] Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter (R) even declared at a statehouse rally: "I'm prepared to bid for that first ticket to shoot a wolf myself."

Montana—While Montana's wolf management plan is more moderate than Idaho's and Wyoming's, the plan is extremely vague and would allow Montana to manage wolves down to minimum levels after delisting. And state wildlife officials have already set a wolf hunting season. The Montana plan also fails to promote adequate non-lethal management of wolves around livestock. This is particularly problematic because more wolves are killed in Montana in response to livestock conflicts than in any other state in the region.

Why Wolves Matter

Wolves are essential to a healthy ecosystem. Within a few years of returning wolves to Yellowstone Park, researchers found that wolves were changing ecosystem dynamics. Wolves reduced coyote populations, which helped small animals, birds, and rodents become more plentiful—a boon for predators like hawks and eagles. Elk soon became naturally vigilant and moved around more frequently, which helped aspen, cottonwood and willow trees grow where they had been over-browsed, in turn allowing the return of beavers and riparian bird species.

Wolves play other valuable roles in the interconnected ecosystem of the West:

- **Elk, deer, and moose benefit from wolf predation.** Wolves and prey such as elk, deer, and moose have existed together for thousands of years. Wolves tend to naturally select as prey the animals easiest for them to hunt—those that are injured, sick, old, or very young. In removing these animals from herds, the remaining animals are younger, stronger, and faster, making the herd more robust and healthier overall.
- **Wolves help prevent the spread of disease in ungulates.** Biologists believe the presence of wolves will prevent chronic wasting disease from wiping out large numbers of deer, as it has in Southern Rockies states such as Colorado. In the Great Lakes states, chronic wasting disease in white-tailed deer has only been located in areas where wolves are not present.
- **Wolves mediate the impact of climate change on scavenging animals such as bears, coyotes, eagles, fox, and many others.** As winters become milder and shorter over time, elk and deer have an easier time surviving. Animals that rely on winter-killed carcasses have had less to eat in recent springs. Wolves can reduce the negative impact of global warming because wolf-killed carcasses provide food for scavengers.

A Timeline of Wolf Restoration

1973:	Wolves added to the endangered species list (at the time, only a remnant population was left in northern Minnesota).
1983:	A lone wolf wanders on its own into northern Montana's Glacier Park from Canada, becoming the first wolf to return to the Northern Rockies in 40 years.
1986:	Magic Pack in Glacier forms and has pups.
1992:	Glacier population reaches 41.
1995-1996:	66 wolves are reintroduced to Yellowstone and central Idaho under a plan that defines wolf recovery to be 300 individuals in the Northern Rockies, with an exchange of animals between the three populations in the Yellowstone, central Idaho, and Glacier ecosytems.
Feb. 2007:	After wolves expand and increase to roughly 1,500 animals in the Northern Rockies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) proposes to delist wolves in Montana and Idaho; Wyoming could be included in the plan if the state adopts an acceptable management plan.
April 2, 2007:	In comments submitted on the FWS plan, more than 200 scientists state that delisting is premature because the recovery number of 300 is too low and because the necessary target of several thousand wolves with exchange between the regions's three populations has not yet been achieved. 98 percent of the public responding to FWS's proposal oppose delisting.
July 2007:	Wolf 10(j) "killing rule" revision is proposed, allowing the killing of wolves in the region even if they remain on the endangered species list. In a separate action, FWS includes Wyoming in the delisting proposal, after approving the state's plan.
Jan. 2008:	Revised wolf 10(j) rule adopted.
Feb. 28, 2008:	Northern Rockies Gray Wolves delisting decision released. Eleven conservation groups file a 60-day notice of intent to sue FWS over the decision.
March 28, 2008:	Delisting rule becomes effective. A killing spree ensues, with more than 100 wolves killed in nearly as many days.
April 28, 2008:	Eleven conservation groups, including NRDC, challenge delisting decision in court.
July 18, 2008:	U.S. District Court Judge grants plaintiffs' request for a preliminary injunction and reinstates federal protections for wolves in the Northern Rockies.
January 17, 2009:	Bush releases rule to delist Northern Rockies wolves days before he leaves office.
January 21, 2009:	Obama administration temporarily freezes delisting rule.
April 2, 2009:	Department of Interior reissues Northern Rockies delisting rule for wolves in Idaho and Montana—a slightly revised version of the Bush rule (Wyoming is excluded from this delisting rule). NRDC and twelve other conservation groups file 60-day notice of intent to sue FWS over the decision.
May 4, 2009:	Delisting rule for wolves in Idaho and Montana takes effect.

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■ **Wolves provide substantial economic benefits.** A 2006 study in Yellowstone determined that tourists visiting the park to view wolves have brought $35 million annually to the region's economy, which turns over into more than $70 million annually for Northern Rockies communities.[2] In the Great Lakes area, wolf-related tourism provides $3 million to the small town of Ely, Minnesota, alone.

We Can Do More to Protect Wolves

Officials at the state and federal level must do more to protect this valuable top-level predator.

■ **Stop delisting.** Idaho's demand for zero wolves and its plans for hunting more than 300 wolves illustrate how vulnerable wolves are without federal protection. States must establish rational, scientifically based wolf management plans and programs that maintain wolf populations at appropriate numbers and ensure their long-term health.

■ **Enhance habitat protection.** Increased settlement and oil and gas development continue to fragment wolf ecosystems in the Northern Rockies and the landscapes that connect them. A recent genetics study determined that Yellowstone wolves are isolated from wolves in central Idaho, largely because wolves cannot travel between the ecosystems without getting killed. More must be done to protect habitat within and between the ecosystems where wolves live.

■ **Reduce wolf/livestock conflicts.** Much more must also be done to utilize existing non-lethal tools and to develop new ways to minimize conflicts across the landscape. With creativity and commitment, many conflicts between wolves and livestock can be resolved without killing wolves. More than half the wolf packs in Idaho and Wyoming overlap grazing allotments on public lands, where the Forest Service could help reduce conflicts by improving grazing practices.

■ **Revise recovery plan to include new information on wolf genetics and habitat needs.** The federal wolf recovery plan for the Northern Rockies was drafted 20 years ago when there were only a handful of wolves in the region. In reaction to opposition to the wolf reintroduction, the government set recovery goals low, at 100 wolves in each state. Today, after collecting data about genetic and habitat requirements, biologists have called for population viability studies and a revision of the recovery goals to reflect today's science. Geneticists have said that several thousand wolves are needed to maintain the long-term health of Northern Rockies wolves.

Back from the Brink: Wolves Thrive in the Great Lakes

More than 200,000 gray wolves once lived throughout the United States, but by the mid 1930s, wolves had been nearly eliminated by trapping, hunting, and poisoning. A few hundred wolves hung on in northern Minnesota.

Under protections offered by the Endangered Species Act in 1973, the few hundred remaining wolves in northern Minnesota survived, and eventually succeeded in repopulating the region. A key ingredient was protection from excessive killing.

Today nearly 4,000 wolves roam the forests of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The enormous success of wolf recovery in the region was the result of federal, state, and tribal wildlife agencies working cooperatively and acting as the advocates and managers for this much-maligned species. Over time, the wolf has become a valued wildlife species to the people of the region.

Approximately half of the public and farmers in Minnesota reported that they cared a great deal or fair amount about wolves, according to a poll conducted in 1999 by Yale University. In the Great Lakes, it took years to develop all the regulatory protections needed so that wolves, once delisted, remained healthy. While the population of wolves in the Northern Rockies has grown, it is nowhere close to the number of wolves that live in the Great Lakes. The key lesson from the Great Lakes is that recovery of an endangered species takes time, public support, and a major commitment from managing agencies.

1 Idaho plan 2002. p. 4

2 Duffield, J. W., C. J. Neher, and D. A. Patterson. 2006. "Integrating Landscape-scale Economic and Ecological Models in the Greater Yellowstone Area: Application to Wolf Recovery," pages 53-58 in A. W. Biel, editor, *Greater Yellowstone Public Lands: A Century of Discovery, Hard Lessons, and Bright Prospects.* Proceedings of the 8th Biennial Scientific Conference on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming, USA.