



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Amended Record of Decision

Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan

May 2004

Since 1974, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has managed gray wolves in Montana under the authority of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Today, gray wolves are thriving and expanding in number and distribution in Montana. At the end of 2002, USFWS determined that wolves met the biological requirements for recovery in the Northern Rockies. The gray wolf's rapid recovery is the result of natural emigration from Canada and a federal effort that reintroduced wolves into Yellowstone National Park and the wilderness areas of central Idaho.

Before USFWS will propose to delist the wolf, however, federal managers must be confident that a viable population of gray wolves will persist if ESA protections are removed. To provide that assurance, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming must develop conservation and management plans and adopt other consistent regulatory mechanisms in state law. Upon delisting, full management authority for wolves will return to the state governments where wolves reside.

In its Final Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management Plan, FWP recommended that the State of Montana adopt a wolf conservation and management plan. The Final EIS considered five alternative approaches that capture the philosophical spectrum of peoples' values, opinions, and beliefs—the social factors that need to be considered in addition to the biological factors.

In September 2003, I selected Alternative 2, the "Updated Council" alternative. With this plan, FWP would employ conservation and management strategies to maintain a recovered population and integrate wolves into Montana's wildlife management programs. Under the "Updated Council" alternative, legal authority to manage wolves, however, would not be transferred to the State of Montana until federal delisting.

In October 2003, Montana, Idaho and Wyoming submitted wolf management plans to USFWS for review. The three state plans were also evaluated by an independent group of wolf experts. USFWS approved the Montana and Idaho management plans as being adequate to maintain their share of the tri-state wolf population securely above recovery levels and as being consistent with respective state laws. Wyoming's plan, however, was not approved. In January 2004, USFWS

announced it would not proceed with a delisting proposal until the Wyoming plan and state laws are amended and approved.

In its Final EIS, FWP considered the possibility of such a delay, and, based on public sentiment concerning developments beyond Montana's control, developed the "Contingency" alternative. This alternative suggests that FWP seek an interim cooperative agreement with USFWS to implement as much of the "Updated Council" alternative as permitted by federal regulations and state law while the wolf remains federally listed. Thus, FWP would become more involved in day to day wolf conservation and management activities. Upon delisting, FWP would then implement the remaining provisions that had been prohibited by federal regulations.

Presently, wolves in the northwest Montana federal recovery area are managed as "threatened" according to regulations published in the Federal Register (April 2003). Wolves in the rest of Montana are managed as "experimental, non-essential" according to regulations published in the Federal Register (November 1994). USFWS recently proposed amending the regulations in the experimental area (Federal Register March 2004). The proposed regulations would allow states with approved management plans to assume a larger role in wolf management through an interim cooperative agreement with the USFWS. A decision is expected later in 2004.

I am amending my Record of Decision (ROD) to select Alternative 5 (Contingency) as FWP's wolf conservation and management plan on an interim basis until the gray wolf is officially delisted. During EIS development, FWP gathered public comment specifically on this alternative and included a thorough environmental analysis of the potential impacts in the Final EIS. Participation prior to delisting allows FWP to more fully understand what is actually occurring now under federal management, to work with the public to facilitate increased understanding of long-term wolf conservation and management, to foster long-term coexistence between wolves and people, and to create a bridge for a smooth transition from federal to state authority upon delisting. Implementing the Contingency alternative prior to delisting does not constitute a substantial change from the proposed action or the preferred alternative. In fact, implementing the Contingency alternative now will provide a bridge between federal management and eventual state management as addressed in the preferred alternative. The short term and long term impacts of the amended ROD are essentially the same as the impacts identified in my original ROD.

In amending the ROD, FWP will be able to take advantage of federal funding that is currently available for interim participation in wolf conservation and management. FWP intends to participate as long as federal funding is available. At the same time, FWP will continue to make every effort to expedite the delisting process. FWP will work with the states of Idaho and Wyoming to remove obstacles to delisting and achieve the complete transfer of authority from the federal government to the respective state governments in a timely fashion.

Concurred by the FWP Commission in action at its May 12, 2004 meeting.

May 12, 2004

M. Jeff Hagener
Director

Date