

in 2001–2002 a wolf from Yellowstone dispersed 240 km (150 mi) into northwestern Montana, and a wolf from Idaho dispersed over 480 km (300 mi) to northwestern Wyoming. Since two-thirds of the wolf population is not radio-collared, additional dispersal has undoubtedly occurred in addition to that documented by radio-collared wolves. Because of the long dispersal distances and the relative speed of natural wolf movement between Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, we anticipate that wolves will continue to maintain high genetic diversity in the three States. If significant genetic concerns do arise at some future time, our experience with wolf relocation shows that we could effectively remedy those concerns with occasional wolf relocation actions.

We also anticipate additional movement of wolves from the northern U.S. Rockies and Canada into western Washington and Oregon and into the Cascade Range. For example, one radio-collared wolf from northwestern Montana was found dead in 1994 from unknown causes in eastern Washington, and a radio-collared young female wolf from central Idaho dispersed into eastern Oregon in early 1999. She was recaptured and returned to the Central Idaho Recovery Area where she would have a better opportunity to find a mate. Since 1999, 2 other dead wolves (1 radio-collared in Idaho and one not radio-collared) were found in eastern Oregon. These wolves were killed by a vehicle collision and an illegal shooting, respectively. Furthermore, suitable habitat and prey conditions exist in other areas to which wolves may be able to disperse from current populations. Given that wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains have dispersed over 800 km (500 mi), it is reasonable to assume that occasional but routine wolf dispersal will continue to occur within 400 km (250 mi) of the current boundaries of the wolf population.

Observation data indicate that the wolves outside of the core recovery areas mostly occur as individuals, although several wolf family units have been reported in the North Cascades (Almack and Fitkin 1998). However, because efforts to locate family units have been unsuccessful, we are not sure whether wolves are reproducing in the North Cascades. Under this final rule, any animals outside the core recovery areas are protected by the Act as threatened wolves, and we will continue to provide protection recommendations for den and rendezvous sites to Federal agencies on a site-specific basis.

While habitat that could support wolves certainly exists in several areas, we have no plans to initiate new wolf restoration efforts for any areas in the western United States outside of those already underway in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and the southwestern States. However, this final rule continues the protections of the Act for any wolves in the wild within all States that are included within the boundaries of the Western DPS. Therefore, any new gray wolf restoration programs undertaken by States or tribes within the boundaries of the DPS would benefit from the protections of the Act as long as the DPS remains listed as threatened.

While we have no plans to actively pursue wolf restoration in other areas of the Western DPS, we will not act to routinely prevent natural wolf recolonization in such areas. Wolves that naturally disperse into other States will be managed on a case-by-case basis, and we have the authority to manage these wolves. Generally, if there are no conflicts with human activities, such wolves will likely not be returned to the area of their origin. If wolves move outside of the recovery areas and depredate livestock, they will be killed rather than moved. In addition, States or tribes considering wolf restoration planning for lands under their jurisdiction may request us to provide technical assistance for those efforts.

Reclassification and Recovery Goals for the Northern U.S. Rocky Mountains

The criteria for threatened and recovered wolf populations in the northern Rocky Mountains have been the subject of intense interest and several peer review efforts (Fritts and Carbyn 1995). The 1987 Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan (Service 1987) defined a recovered wolf population as securing and maintaining a minimum of 10 breeding pairs in each of 3 recovery areas for a minimum of 3 successive years. A breeding pair was defined as “Two wolves of opposite sex and adequate age, capable of producing offspring.” Recovery areas were relatively small and separate areas in northern Montana, central Idaho, and the Greater Yellowstone Area.

The 1994 environmental impact statement (EIS) review (Appendix 9, in Service 1994a) indicated that the 1987 recovery goal was, at best, a minimal recovery goal, and that modifications were warranted on the basis of more recent information about wolf distribution, connectivity, and numbers. Fritts (Appendix 9, in Service 1994a) specifically reviewed the issue of a viable wolf population in the EIS on wolf reintroduction. He concluded that

“Thirty or more breeding pairs comprising some +300 wolves in a metapopulation with genetic exchange between subpopulations should have a high probability of long-term persistence.” Further, Fritts stated, “My conclusion is that the 1987 wolf recovery plan’s population goal of 10 breeding pairs of wolves in 3 separate recovery areas for 3 consecutive years is reasonably sound and would maintain a viable wolf population into the foreseeable future. The goal is somewhat conservative, however, and should be considered minimal.” In his review, a breeding pair was defined as “An adult male and an adult female wolf that have produced at least 2 pups that survived until December 31 of the year of their birth, during the previous breeding season.” His review was based upon abutting recovery areas that were much larger than those recommended in the 1987 plan. This proximity would allow wolves to occasionally move from one recovery population to another, thus producing the metapopulation structure that was inherent to Fritts’ analysis, but was absent from the 1987 Recovery Plan goal.

The Service (Bangs 2002) conducted another review of what constitutes a recovered wolf population in late 2001 and early 2002. Relevant literature was reviewed, and responses were received and evaluated from 50 of 88 experts contacted. That review showed that there is a wide variety of professional opinion about wolf population viability. However, that review supported and reaffirmed Fritts’ earlier conclusions that 30 breeding pairs of wolves (using Fritts’ definition of a breeding pair) widely distributed in a metapopulation structure (that is, populations within dispersal distance to promote movement between recovery populations) throughout the mountainous portions of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming for 3 successive years would exceed the minimum biological requirements of a viable and recovered wolf population. The experts also compared the 1987 recovery plan recommendation of a recovered wolf population with Fritts’ recommendation and concluded that Fritts’ definition was more likely to define a viable wolf population than the 1987 recovery plan definition.

Therefore, in place of the 1987 Recovery Plan goal, we have adopted the definition of wolf population viability and recovery developed in the 1994 EIS (Service 1994a). That definition is “Thirty breeding pairs of wolves (defined as an adult male and an adult female that raise at least 2 pups until December 31 of the year of their birth), comprising some +300