

were asked to review the proposed rule and the supporting data, and to point out any mistakes in our data or analysis, and to identify any relevant data that we might have overlooked. We have incorporated their comments into the final rule, as appropriate, and have briefly summarized their observations below.

Of the peer reviewers who specifically expressed support for, or opposition to, our various proposed actions, all supported the DPS approach, that is, dividing the current listing into smaller geographic units that better reflect recovery progress and recovery needs, and providing the protections that are appropriate to that progress and those needs. All but one supported reclassification of the wolves in the western Great Lakes area to threatened status, and that dissenting reviewer recommended that we go a step further and delist those wolves instead of reclassifying them. Most peer reviewers supported reclassification of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf population to threatened, but one questioned whether this is appropriate before the reclassification criteria of the 1984 Recovery Plan have been achieved. Another reviewer supported reclassification of the Western DPS, but stated that delisting should not occur until each of the 3 recovery segments exceed 10 breeding pairs. One reviewer suggested reducing the recovery goal for northwestern Montana to fewer than 10 breeding pairs.

Of those who specifically commented on it, all peer reviewers supported the proposed establishment of a separate Northeastern DPS. There was general support for gray wolf delisting in areas where wolf restoration was not necessary and not feasible, but there was some disagreement on where those areas were. Delisting in the Southeast was supported, but delisting in California and Nevada was opposed by two reviewers. Delisting the Dakotas (instead of reclassifying to threatened, as we proposed) was recommended by one reviewer. Five of the reviewers also recommended that the southern Rocky Mountains (Colorado, Utah, and the northern parts of Arizona and New Mexico) either be established as a separate DPS, or be included in the proposed endangered Southwestern (Mexican) DPS rather than in the threatened Western DPS. One reviewer recommended that a Northwestern DPS be established, composed of California and the western halves of Washington and Oregon.

Numerous suggestions for technical corrections were provided by the peer reviewers, and they also pointed out

parts of the proposal that needed clarification.

The recommendations of the peer reviewers, as well as the comments we received from other sources during the comment period, are discussed in the following section. We also provide explanations for why the recommendations were, or were not, adopted in our final decision.

Summary of Comments and Recommendations

In our July 13, 2000, proposed rule and associated notifications, we requested that all interested parties submit comments, data, or other information that might aid in our decisions or otherwise contribute to the development of this final rule. The comment period for the proposed rule was open from July 13, 2000, through November 13, 2000. During that period we publicized and conducted 14 public hearings and numerous public informational meetings in order to explain the proposal, respond to questions concerning gray wolf protection and recovery, and receive input from interested parties. We contacted appropriate Federal, State, and tribal agencies, scientific organizations, agricultural organizations, outdoor user groups, environmental organizations, animal rights groups, and other interested parties and requested that they comment on the proposal. We conducted two national press conferences to promote wide coverage of our proposed rule in the print media, and we published legal notices in many newspapers across the range of the gray wolf announcing the proposal and hearings, and inviting comments. We posted the proposal and numerous background documents on our Web site, and we provided copies upon request by mail or E-mail and at our hearings and informational meetings. We established several methods for interested parties to provide comments and other materials, including verbally or in writing at public hearings, by letter, E-mail, facsimile, or on our Web site.

During the 4-month comment period and at our 14 public hearings we received nearly 16,000 separate comments, including comments from 329 individuals who spoke at public hearings and comments from 11 peer reviewers. We also received form letters and "petitions" with over 27,000 additional signatures. Comments originated from addresses in all 50 States, including the District of Columbia.

We revised and updated the proposed rule in order to make the final rule

reflect comments and information we received during the comment period. In the following paragraphs we address the substantive comments that we received concerning various aspects of the proposed rule. Comments of a similar nature are grouped together under subject headings (referred to as "Issues" for the purpose of this summary) below, along with our response to each. In addition to the following discussion, refer to the *Changes from the Proposed Rule* section (also below) for more details.

A. Technical and Editorial Comments

Issue 1: Numerous technical and editorial comments and corrections were provided by respondents, including the peer reviewers. Clarification and consistent usage of terms such as "public lands," "tamed," "domesticated," and "breeding pair" was recommended.

Response: We have corrected and updated numbers and other data wherever appropriate. Wolf population estimates made during 1999 have been replaced with the final numbers calculated in late December 2001. We also clarified numerous discussion points and have provided clearer terminology in several locations. We have substituted "domesticated" for "tamed" and have standardized our use of the phrase "breeding pair."

Issue 2: Commenter pointed out inconsistencies between the text of the proposed Western DPS 4(d) rule, the text explaining that proposed rule, and the table that compared it to the experimental populations special rules and the normal protections of the Act. In addition, the phrase "public land" is used several times in the table but is not defined there.

Response: We have revised the table, the explanatory text, and the wording of that 4(d) rule to make sure they are consistent. For example, as defined in the 4(d) rule, the term public lands refers only to federally administered lands unless specifically defined otherwise in State or tribal wolf management plans (see issue U, "State Wolf Management Plans"). Other public lands such as city, county, or State lands would be treated the same as private land for the purposes of wolf management under the Western DPS 4(d) rule.

B. Compliance With Laws, Regulations, and Policies

Issue 1: Commenters expressed concern that the proposal was not in compliance with the Act and implementing regulations.