

avoid extinction. The difficulty of applying PVA techniques to wolves has been discussed by Fritts and Carbyn (1995). Problems include our inability to provide accurate input information for the probability of occurrence of, and impact from, catastrophic events (such as a major disease outbreak or prey base collapse; we know of no catastrophic events that have significantly impacted large wolf populations except for human persecution), providing realistic inputs for the influences of environmental variation (such as annual fluctuations in winter severity and the resulting impacts on prey abundance and vulnerability), temporal variation, and individual heterogeneity, as well as dealing with the spatial aspects of extreme territoriality and the long-distance dispersals shown by wolves. Each of these factors can be a powerful determinant of the outcome of a gray wolf PVA, and relatively minor changes in any of these input values can result in vastly different outcomes.

PVAs are also useful for studying small populations. In a small-population study, the modeling exercise can provide clues to which demographic, genetic, or environmental parameters may have the greatest likelihood of influencing a species' survival, and thus possible insight into areas where initial conservation actions should be focused. However, for obviously recovering entities like the gray wolf populations of the Northern U.S. Rocky Mountains and the Midwest, PVA modeling exercises may largely be an exercise in quantifying the recovery of a species whose increases, and the reasons for them, are already qualitatively quite apparent. In the case of species like the gray wolf—a species that has been well studied and is well along the road to recovery—generally little is to be learned from a PVA.

The WI DNR conducted a PVA for the State's wolf population several years ago when its wolf population was considerably smaller than it is today. Most scenarios that were modeled by WI DNR (varying the probability of catastrophic events, reproductive rates, and environmental variability) resulted in very low probabilities of extinction even with the maximum wolf population limited to only 500 animals (WI DNR 1999a). The model treated the Wisconsin wolf population as a totally isolated population (that is, with no possibility of wolf immigration from Minnesota or Michigan), so even those low extinction probabilities were overestimates. Because this reclassification reduces Federal protection of wolves only slightly, a PVA would not be expected show any

resultant significant change in the risk of extinction.

Finally, we note that none of the 11 peer reviewers of the proposal indicated that there was any need for the Service to conduct a PVA or minimum viable population analysis for the 2 gray wolf populations for which we proposed changes in July 2000. One reviewer stated that PVAs are of little value and may even be misleading.

Issue 12: The Service should prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for this rule.

Response: As stated in the proposal, the question of whether environmental assessments or environmental impact statements need to be prepared was addressed by our previous determination (48 FR 49244; October 25, 1983) in which we stated that such documents do not have to be prepared for regulations developed under section 4(a) of the Act.

Issue 13: A better notification process is needed for our public hearings.

Response: We did a great deal to alert interested parties to the details of public hearings. Public hearing times and locations were announced in the **Federal Register**, posted on our Web site, publicized in local and national press releases, and, in some areas of the Midwest, advertised on local radio stations. Notification letters were sent to numerous organizations so they could alert their memberships. In addition, parties who requested to be added to our wolf electronic mailing list received information on hearings and public meetings electronically. However, we acknowledge that, despite all these efforts, some interested parties did not learn of the hearings in time to attend. We are interested in receiving ideas to further improve our efforts to publicize our public hearings in the future. However, in this case there were numerous avenues, in addition to public hearings, for interested individuals to obtain information and submit comments on the proposal. All comments received during the comment period, whether presented at a public hearing or provided in another manner, received the same review and consideration.

Issue 14: The Service should consider how to delist nonessential experimental populations.

Response: For the gray wolf, the nonessential experimental populations in the Northern Rocky Mountains are part of a larger recovery program that also includes the northwestern Montana wolves. They will be delisted at whatever time the Western DPS is delisted.

Issue 15: One commenter stated that we cannot use wolves in experimental populations to count toward recovery or reclassification goals, because such populations can only be used for research purposes.

Response: The term “experimental” is used in the Act to describe these populations; however, this designation does not mean these populations may only be used for research purposes. Reintroductions of plants and animals are often experimental in the sense that they may use techniques that are newly developed, untested on that species or locality, or uncertain in success rate for other reasons. The authority to designate and establish experimental populations was added to the Act for the specific purpose of assisting the Service in establishing additional populations to further the recovery of the species. We have used this authority for many species to help achieve recovery goals by expanding occupied range. In the case of the two nonessential experimental populations (NEPs) in the northern U.S. Rockies, the final rule establishing those two NEPs indicated specifically that they were being established to help achieve the Western Plan's goals to establish viable wolf populations in central Idaho and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

C. Comments Regarding the Number of Distinct Population Segments and Recovery Programs Necessary for Gray Wolf Recovery

Issue: A large number of comments expressed the opinion that additional gray wolf DPSs should be established, and that the Service should initiate additional recovery programs in order to achieve gray wolf recovery as mandated by the Act. Additional DPSs and recovery programs were suggested for Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and Iowa; Virginia and Kentucky; the Carolinas, Georgia, and Tennessee; California and Nevada; Colorado, Utah, and the northern portions of New Mexico and Arizona; Oregon and Washington; the Pacific Coast; the Cascade Range; West Virginia; Missouri; Florida; and Utah. In addition, some respondents recommended that gray wolves should be reintroduced and recovered throughout their historical range or “in all States.”

Response: These comments appear to reflect a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Act and confusion regarding the meaning of “recover” under the Act. The purpose of the Act is to provide for the conservation of endangered and threatened species. Conservation is defined as the use of all methods and procedures which are