

human-caused mortality will not keep the northern Rocky Mountains wolf population from continuing its rapid expansion. As the wolf population has expanded rapidly, fewer areas of remote habitat remain for wolves to be moved to. Therefore, to resolve livestock depredations, the Service will be lethally controlling wolves in most situations.

*Issue 2:* A number of comments stressed that we should emphasize nonlethal depredation control measures and increase research efforts aimed at improved nonlethal control measures.

*Response:* The Service will continue to cooperate with USDA/APHIS-Wildlife Services, State DNRs, universities, and special interest groups to investigate ways to reduce the level of conflict between people, livestock, and wolves. To date we and our partners in wolf recovery have investigated and implemented the use of fencing; guard animals; extra herders; light, siren, and other scare devices, including those activated by wolf radio-collars; shock aversion conditioning; flagging; less-than-lethal munitions; offensive and repelling scents; supplemental feeding; harassing wolves at dens and rendezvous sites to move the center of wolf pack activity away from livestock; trapping and moving individual pack members or the entire pack; moving livestock and providing alternative pasture; investigating the characteristics of livestock operations that experience higher depredation rates; and research into the type of livestock and rate of livestock loss that are confirmed in remote public grazing allotments. We also correspond with and maintain professional contact with researchers and wildlife managers throughout the world to discuss and learn how they are dealing with similar problems. As a result of these attempts at nonlethal methods, we have not yet discovered a reliable method of nonlethal control. It is apparent that lethal control will remain an important tool for managing wolves that learn to depredate on livestock.

Lethal depredation control in the Western DPS is further discussed under section K. *Special Regulations under Section 4(d) for the Western DPS*, above.

*N. Comments Regarding the Eastern DPS (composed of the proposed Western Great Lakes DPS and the proposed Northeastern DPS, as well as additional States)*

Most comments regarding the Eastern DPS expressed opposition to delisting Midwestern wolves, addressed the proposed special regulation for the proposed Western Great Lakes DPS, or

dealt with the proposed Northeastern DPS. Comments in the latter two categories are addressed in separate sections O and R, below. Other comments regarding the Eastern DPS follow:

*Issue 1:* Numerous comments expressed opposition to reclassifying Midwestern wolves to threatened status.

*Response:* Since our proposal was developed, we have received 2 additional years of data showing that wolf numbers in the Midwest are continuing to expand. We have reviewed, and have included in this rule, that additional population data, as well as updated information regarding disease occurrence and human-caused mortality. The additional information supports the reclassification from endangered to threatened.

*Issue 2:* The Service should support monitoring of gray wolves in the Midwest, and should improve wolf monitoring in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan.

*Response:* We have been partially funding wolf monitoring and research efforts by the Michigan and Wisconsin DNRs for many years. This support is expected to continue as long as the gray wolf is protected under the Act, and may continue to some extent for 5 years post-delisting.

Currently, we are not aware of any wild gray wolves in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan. While we understand the interest in identifying and protecting gray wolves that might occur in the Lower Peninsula, those wolves would be unnecessary to accomplishing gray wolf recovery under the Act. While we would provide technical assistance to initiate wolf monitoring and conservation in the Lower Peninsula if requested by the State and interested tribes, it is unlikely that we will be able to provide funding for wolf monitoring in the Lower Peninsula.

*Issue 3:* We should consider the potential impacts of hybridization with coyotes in the Midwest.

*Response:* We are concerned about gray wolf-coyote hybridization. There is mitochondrial DNA evidence that such hybridization may have occurred in the past (Lehman *et al.* 1991), but the nature of mitochondrial DNA provides little information on when, and how frequently, wolf-coyote hybridization may have occurred. There currently is no evidence that hybrid events have significantly changed the wolves in the Midwest. Morphologically, behaviorally, and ecologically they continue to look, act, and function as wolves, rather than like hybrids.

*Issue 4:* The Service should delist gray wolves in the Midwest.

*Response:* We recognize that wolf numbers in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan have surpassed the numerical goals of the Eastern Timber Wolf Recovery Plan. However, at the time our proposal was being prepared, we lacked reliable information on future wolf management in Minnesota, and we were therefore unable to evaluate the threats that might impact Minnesota wolves if they were delisted. See the Summary of Factors Affecting the Species section below under factor D., *The adequacy or inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms*, for additional discussion of Eastern DPS gray wolves.

The subsequent completion of the 2001 Minnesota Wolf Management Plan gives us the ability to better evaluate the extent of the threats that would likely be experienced by Minnesota gray wolves if they were delisted (see issue U, "State Wolf Management Plans"). Therefore, now that we have completed this rulemaking, we intend to reevaluate the threats to wolves in the Midwest, in light of current data and expected future wolf management by the States and tribes, in order to determine if the Eastern DPS constitutes a recovered entity. If we conclude that recovery under the Act has occurred, we will promptly publish a delisting proposal and open a public comment period. As we develop the proposal and take final action, we will again evaluate information on gray wolf presence in the northeastern United States.

*O. Special Regulations Under 4(d) for Parts of the Eastern DPS (formerly the Western Great Lakes and Northeastern DPSs)*

*Issue 1:* The government should not be involved in control of depredating wolves in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. It should be the farmers' responsibility to keep their livestock out of the reach of wolves.

*Response:* Assisting farmers in reducing the adverse impacts of wildlife on agricultural activities has long been a program of the Federal Government, and currently is accomplished by the Wildlife Services program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In addition, the Service has a policy that directs us to minimize the adverse economic effects of our endangered and threatened species recovery programs. Thus, reducing wolf depredation on livestock by removing the offending wolves and wolf packs is an appropriate part of our wolf recovery programs, as long as those activities are consistent with gray wolf recovery. We believe that