

In summary, we believe that habitat or range destruction or degradation, or related factors that may affect gray wolf numbers, do not by themselves or in combination with other factors place the Eastern DPS of the gray wolf in danger of extinction. Recovery efforts over the past decade, as well as State, tribal, and Federal land management agency wolf management plans and practices will provide adequate protection for wolf populations, maintain their prey base, preserve denning sites and dispersal corridors, and are likely to keep wolf populations well above the numerical recovery criteria established in the Federal Recovery Plan for the Eastern Timber Wolf (Service 1992a).

Western DPS. The Recovery Plan (Service 1987) and the EIS for wolf reintroduction into Yellowstone and central Idaho (Service 1994a) recommended that wolf recovery efforts in the northern U.S. Rocky Mountains focus on areas that contained large blocks of public land, abundant wild ungulates, and minimal livestock to cause potential conflicts between people and wolves. Three primary recovery areas were identified: northwestern Montana, central Idaho, and the Greater Yellowstone Area (Service 1987). The northwestern Montana recovery area (more than 50,000 sq km (19,200 sq mi) is the area north of Interstate 90 and west of Interstate 15, and is a mixture of public land, primarily administered by the USDA Forest Service, and private land. The economy and local culture is diverse and not as agriculturally based as in other parts of Montana (Bangs *et al.* 1995). The Greater Yellowstone Area and central Idaho areas, 64,000 sq km (24,600 sq mi) and 53,900 sq km (20,700 sq mi) respectively, are primarily composed of public lands (Service 1994a). These areas of potential wolf habitat are secure, and no foreseeable habitat-related threats prevent them from supporting a wolf population that exceeds recovery levels. There is already a demonstrated connectivity between occupied wolf habitat in Canada, northwestern Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming to ensure routine interchange of sufficient numbers of dispersing wolves to maintain demographic and genetic diversity in the wolf metapopulation. To date, natural connectivity between Idaho and northwestern Montana into the Greater Yellowstone Area appears to be more limited than that between Canada, northwestern Montana, and Idaho, but it does not appear to be a significant issue that would threaten wolf population viability in the Yellowstone segment of the northern Rocky Mountain wolf

population. In addition, management actions have relocated about 120 wolves in and between Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, including relocations between the various recovery areas. Wolf relocations will be used less often at higher wolf population levels because much of the most suitable wolf habitat is already occupied by resident wolf packs, but it will still occur and can further lessen the probability that genetic isolation could impact wolf population viability.

Wild ungulate populations in these three areas are composed mainly of elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose, and (only in the Greater Yellowstone Area) bison. The States of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming have managed resident ungulate populations for decades and maintain them at densities that would support a recovered wolf population. There is no foreseeable condition that would cause a decline in ungulate populations significant enough to affect a recovered wolf population. While 100,000 to 250,000 wild ungulates are estimated in each State, domestic ungulates, primarily cattle and sheep, are typically at least twice as numerous even on public lands (Service 1994a). The only areas large enough to support wolf packs, but lacking livestock grazing, are Yellowstone National Park and some adjacent USDA Forest Service Wilderness and parts of wilderness areas in central Idaho and northwestern Montana. Consequently, many wolf pack territories have included areas used by livestock, primarily cattle. While there is no livestock grazing in Glacier National Park, every wolf pack in northwestern Montana has interacted with some livestock, primarily cattle. Conflict between wolves and livestock has resulted in the annual removal of less than 6 percent of the wolf population (Bangs *et al.* 1995, Service *et al.* 2002). This level of removal by itself is not believed to cause declines in wolf populations.

In summary, we do not believe that habitat loss or deterioration, habitat fragmentation, or a decline in the abundance of wild prey will occur at levels that will affect wolf recovery and long-term population viability in the Western DPS.

Southwestern DPS. Sufficient suitable habitat exists in the Southwestern United States to support current recovery plan objectives for the Southwestern (Mexican) gray wolf. These habitats occur primarily on national forests and Native American reservations. Current and reasonably foreseeable management practices on these areas are expected to support

ungulate populations at levels that will sustain wolf populations which meet or exceed recovery plan objectives. Habitat destruction or modification is not currently considered a threat or deterrent for restoration of Southwestern (Mexican) gray wolves.

B. Overutilization for Commercial, Recreational, Scientific, or Educational Purposes

General. Since their listing under the Act, no gray wolves have been legally killed or removed from the wild in the conterminous 48 States for either commercial or recreational purposes. We acknowledge that some wolves may have been illegally killed for commercial use of the pelts and other parts, but illegal commercial trafficking in wolf pelts or wolf parts is believed to be rare. Illegal capture of wolves for commercial breeding purposes is also possible, but is believed to be rare. The large fines and prison sentences provided for by the Act for criminal violations are believed to substantially discourage and minimize the illegal killing of wolves for commercial or recreational purposes. These penalties will remain following the reclassification to threatened status, although the maximum fines and prison sentences are reduced to \$25,000 and 6 months for the wolves reclassified to threatened.

The intentional or incidental killing, or capture and permanent confinement, of endangered or threatened gray wolves for scientific purposes can only legally occur under permits issued by us (for example, under section 10(a)(1)(A) and 10(a)(1)(B) of the Act), under an incidental take statement issued by us as part of a biological opinion evaluating the effects of an action by a Federal agency, under an incidental take permit issued by us pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(B), or by a State agency operating under a cooperative agreement with us pursuant to section 6 of the Act (50 CFR 17.21(c)(5) and 17.31(b)). Although exact figures are not available rangewide, such removals of wolves from the wild have been very limited and probably comprised an average of fewer than 2 animals per year since the species was first listed as endangered. These animals were either taken from the Minnesota wolf population during long-term research activities (about 15 gray wolves); were accidental takings as a result of research activities in Wisconsin (4–5 mortalities and 1 long-term confinement); were accidentally killed during routine capture, monitoring, and research efforts in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, or Arizona (fewer than 6 wolves); were