

Dated: March 17, 2003.

Steve Williams,

Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

50 CFR Part 17

RIN 1018-AJ04

Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Removing the Western Distinct Population Segment of Gray Wolf From the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Advance notice of proposed rulemaking.

SUMMARY: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service or we) announces our intention to conduct rulemaking under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (Act), to remove the Western Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife in the near future. Specifically, we intend to propose to delist the gray wolf in the Northern Rocky Mountains and western United States where it is presently

listed. If this proposal is finalized, the gray wolf would be delisted in the Western Gray Wolf DPS, existing special regulations established under section 4(d) of the Act for the Western DPS would be abolished, the nonessential experimental designations for reintroduced gray wolves would be removed, and future management of this species would be conducted by the appropriate State and tribal wildlife agencies. As published concurrently in this **Federal Register**, the Service also intends to initiate proposed rulemaking to delist gray wolves in the Eastern Gray Wolf DPS. Neither proposed rulemaking would affect the protection currently afforded by the Act to gray wolves in the Southwestern DPS, the nonessential experimental population in the Southwest DPS, or the red wolf (*Canis rufus*), a separate species found in the southeastern United States that is listed as endangered.

DATES: We are not seeking comments on this planned proposed rulemaking at this time. A public comment period, including the opportunity for public hearings and informational meetings, will follow the publication of the proposed rule to remove (or delist) the Western Gray Wolf DPS.

ADDRESSES: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Western Gray Wolf Recovery Coordinator, 100 N. Park, #320, Helena, MT 59601; WesternGrayWolf@fws.gov.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Ed Bangs, phone 406-449-5225 ext. 204. Additional information on gray wolf recovery in the Western DPS is available on our World Wide Web site at <http://westerngraywolf.fws.gov>. Direct all questions or requests for additional information to the Service (*see ADDRESSES* above).

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

Published concurrently in today's **Federal Register** is our final rule establishing three Distinct Population Segments (DPSs) of gray wolves within the conterminous 48 States in accordance with our Policy Regarding the Recognition of Distinct Vertebrate Population Segments Under the Endangered Species Act (61 FR 4722, February 7, 1996) and reclassifying two of these DPSs based on the status of current wolf populations within these DPSs. The Eastern Gray Wolf DPS and Western Gray Wolf DPS are reclassified as threatened while the Southwestern Gray Wolf DPS remains endangered (*see map*). The final reclassification rule summarizes information on the biology and ecology of gray wolves, taxonomy, historical range, previous Federal action, DPS designations, recovery plans, and the recovery progress of gray wolves in the lower 48 States.