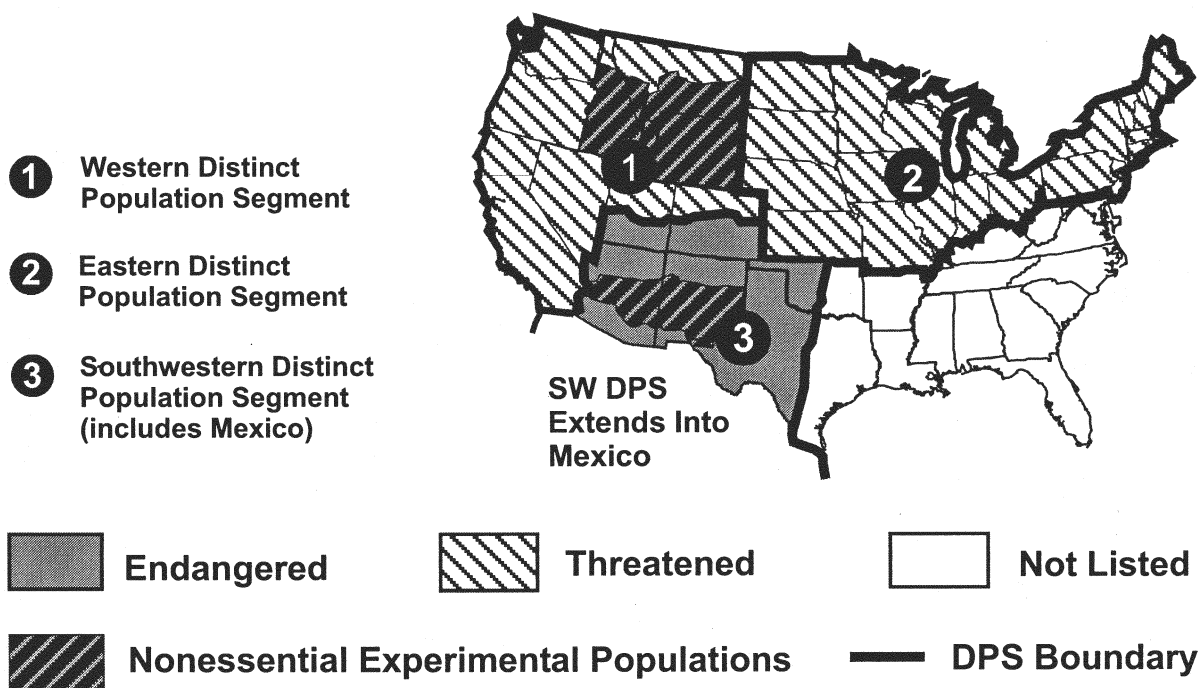


Status of the Gray Wolf in the Continental U.S.



This advance notice of proposed rulemaking (ANPR) announces our intent to propose rulemaking to remove the Western Gray Wolf DPS from protection under the Act based on evidence, as described in the final reclassification rule, indicating that the gray wolf in the Western Gray Wolf DPS is exceeding its wolf population recovery goals and on our preliminary analysis of threats to the DPS. The exterior boundary of the Western DPS encompasses the States of California, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Wyoming, Utah north of U.S. Highway 50, and Colorado north of Interstate Highway 70. Gray wolves in this geographic area are included in the Western DPS, except for gray wolves that are part of an experimental population. Gray wolves in captivity that originated from, or whose ancestors originated from, this geographic area are also included in the Western DPS.

In addition, this ANPR also announces our intention to propose to remove the two nonessential experimental population designations (NEPs) for gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains. The final rule establishing those two NEPs in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming indicated specifically that they were created to help establish viable wolf populations in central Idaho and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (59 FR 60252

and 60266; November 22, 1994). Since these NEPs are part of the larger recovery program, these designations would be removed if the Western DPS is delisted.

In addition, this ANPR announces our intention to respond to a petition for delisting the gray wolves in the Rocky Mountains through this anticipated proposed rulemaking. As stated in the final reclassification rule published today, Mr. Karl Knuchel, on behalf of the Friends of Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd Inc., has petitioned us to delist gray wolves in the Rocky Mountains.

Conservation and Recovery of the Gray Wolf in the Western DPS

Understanding the Service's strategy for gray wolf recovery first requires an understanding of the meaning of "recover" and "conserve" under the Act. "Conserve" is defined in the Act itself (section 3(3)) while "recovery" is defined in the Act's implementing regulations at 50 CFR 402.02. Conserve is defined, in part, as "the use of all methods and procedures which are necessary to bring any endangered species or threatened species to the point at which the measures provided pursuant to this Act are no longer necessary." Recovery is defined as "improvement in the status of listed species to the point at which listing is no longer appropriate under the criteria

set out in section 4(a)(1) of the Act." Essentially, recover and conserve both mean to bring a species to the point at which it is no longer threatened or endangered and no longer needs the protections of the Act.

Critical to our analysis of whether a species is ready for delisting is the achievement of the species' recovery goals, the reduction of threats to the species that caused the species to become listed, and the reduction of any new threats that could cause the species to become endangered in the foreseeable future. To determine the appropriate goals for achieving recovery, we rely on a peer-reviewed Recovery Plan: The revised Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan (Service 1987). In addition, we conducted another review of what constitutes a recovered wolf population in late 2001 and early 2002 to ensure long-term population viability of gray wolves in the northwestern United States (Bangs 2002). Based on the opinions of experts who responded in that review, we have adopted the definition of wolf population viability and recovery developed in the 1994 Environmental Impact Statement for the reintroduction of gray wolves to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho (Service 1994) in place of the 1987 Recovery Plan goal. That definition is "Thirty breeding pairs of wolves (defined as an adult male and an