



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT COMPLETED ON WOLF REINTRODUCTION IN YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK

The Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has officially recommended that an "experimental population" of wolves be reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and central Idaho as part of recovery actions for the endangered gray wolf, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt announced today.

"We are nearing the end of a long and exhaustive process to determine the future of wolves in the Yellowstone ecosystem," said Babbitt. "Although this is not the final step in the EIS process, this document does represent an extraordinary effort in public involvement and participation."

More than 160,000 comments were logged on the draft EIS, released last July, the largest response to any action ever proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The recommendation is included as one of five possible actions identified in a final environmental impact statement released today. The document, prepared by the Fish and Wildlife Service as directed by Congress, will be reviewed by Interior Department officials during a mandatory 30-day waiting period before a Record of Decision is signed, identifying the action selected by the Department.

Other options outlined in the final EIS include natural recovery, establishment of a non-experimental population, a "no-wolf" alternative, and establishment of a special, state-managed wolf population.

"We tried to ensure through this process that everyone with an interest in wolf reintroduction had the opportunity to weigh in," said George Frampton, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "Over the course of 2 years, we held 61 open houses, 22 public hearings, and over 30 presentations to interest groups in the affected areas and around the country."

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"The wolf reintroduction issue has inspired an unprecedented outpouring of public comment," said Mollie Beattie, Fish and Wildlife Service Director. "This speaks volumes about the wolf's prominence in our society's folklore, literature, and culture."

The Service's recommendation for wolf reintroduction specifies introducing wolves from Canada into Yellowstone National Park and on Department of Agriculture U.S. Forest Service lands in central Idaho. The introduced populations would be designated "nonessential experimental" under Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act.

Such designation allows management flexibility, including provisions allowing wolves to be killed or harassed, under certain conditions, if determined to be preying on livestock or if wild populations of deer, elk, and other large game are severely affected by wolf predation. The recommendation encourages compensation to landowners who suffer losses to wolves, to be funded by private interests (at least one non-government organization has already established a fund for this purpose).

It is generally agreed that wolves will eventually repopulate the Yellowstone ecosystem naturally as animals from Canada and Montana expand their range, but this process could take decades to occur. Should wolves reestablish themselves naturally, they would receive full protection of the Endangered Species Act, and there would be less management flexibility. Under the Service's recommendation, wolf populations would be expected to recover by 2002.

Under the Service's wolf recovery plan, recovery of wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains requires that 10 breeding pairs (about 100 wolves) be maintained in each of three recovery areas for a period of three years. Recovery areas include northwest Montana, central Idaho, and the area in and near Yellowstone National Park. About five wolf packs have become established in northwest Montana as wolves from Canada have expanded their range.

As with all species listed under the Endangered Species Act, the Service developed a recovery plan aimed at bringing wolf populations to the level that protection of the Act is no longer needed. Reintroduction into Yellowstone National Park is one action recommended in the recovery plan to assist in wolf recovery.

The thousands of comments received on the draft EIS ranged from outright opposition to wolf reintroduction, to support for

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controlled release of wolves, to establishment of fully protected populations in Yellowstone and central Idaho. Among considerations from those who oppose reintroduction are concerns for safety of livestock and health of prey populations, particularly large game species.

Gray wolves were common in the northern Rocky Mountain states prior to 1870. Populations declined as the result of human settlement and decreasing numbers of bison, elk, deer and other species used by wolves as a food source. Settlers and trappers, fearing for the safety of livestock, carried out campaigns to exterminate wolves in the Rocky Mountain area.

Wolf populations had disappeared from the western United States by 1930. Wolves in the lower 48 states were listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1973. Gray wolves are currently endangered in the lower 48 states, except in Minnesota where they are designated as a threatened species. Wolves in Alaska are not listed as endangered or threatened.

Copies of the final environmental impact statement will be available for public information on May 12 in local libraries in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho, and in some larger cities across the nation.