The Gray Wolf and the Endangered Species Act (ESA): A Brief Legal History

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Summary

Wolves had all but disappeared from the contiguous United States when Congress enacted the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA), and the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) listed wolves as an endangered species in most of the lower 48 states. Since then, the gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) has held every status of protection under the ESA, as regulatory efforts have shifted from conserving the wolf, which culminated in reintroducing wolves into three parts of the American West in the 1990s, to reducing wolf protections where its population has surged. Litigation has followed each regulatory change. After courts rejected regulatory efforts to reduce protections, Congress enacted P.L. 112-10, Section 1713, which removes federal protection of the gray wolf in Montana, Idaho, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, and north-central Utah, and marks the first legislative delisting in the history of the ESA.

Other changes to wolf protection are contemplated. FWS has proposed recognizing a new species of wolf, the eastern wolf (*Canis lycaon*), and changing the gray wolf’s historic range to omit all or parts of 29 states in the eastern United States. Additionally, FWS has proposed delisting gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes area and evaluating whether wolf populations in the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest are appropriately protected under the ESA. Pending legislation would shift gray wolf management to the states (H.R. 1819 and H.R. 2584, § 119), or would eliminate ESA protections for gray wolves (H.R. 838, H.R. 509, and S. 249).

This report provides a brief history of the laws, regulations, and lawsuits related to the wolf’s protected status. Fuller analyses of the concepts discussed in this report can be found in the companion report, CRS Report RL34238, *Gray Wolves Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA): Distinct Population Segments and Experimental Populations*, by Kristina Alexander and M. Lynne Corn.
Contents

Background ...................................................................................................................................... 1
Listing History of the Gray Wolf ..................................................................................................... 1
Gray Wolf Experimental Populations .............................................................................................. 2
Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segments ........................................................................................ 4
  2003 Western, Eastern, and Southwestern DPSs .......................................................................... 4
  2007 Western Great Lakes DPS and 2008 Northern Rocky Mountain DPS ............................. 5
  2009 Western Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountain DPSs ............................................. 7
  Conditional Settlement Agreement ............................................................................................ 8
Gray Wolf Legislation .................................................................................................................... 8
Proposed Rulemaking: Redefining Populations, Species, and Range ........................................... 10

Figures

Figure 1. Gray Wolf Protection Pursuant to 1978 ESA Listing ....................................................... 2
Figure 2. Gray Wolf Protection after Reintroduction of Mexican Gray Wolf .............................. 3
Figure 3. Gray Wolf Protection after 2003 DPS Designations ...................................................... 5
Figure 4. Gray Wolf Protection after 2007-2008 DPS Designations ........................................... 6
Figure 5. Gray Wolf Protection after 2009 DPS Designations ...................................................... 7
Figure 6. Gray Wolf Protection after P.L. 112-10 ......................................................................... 9
Figure 7. Gray Wolf Protection Proposed by 76 Fed. Reg. 26086 ............................................... 11

Contacts

Author Contact Information ........................................................................................................... 11
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................................... 11
Background

At the time of its 1978 listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA or the Act), the wolf was nearly extirpated from all of the lower 48 states except Minnesota. Since then, the population of the gray wolf has grown, prompting many to argue that protection is no longer necessary. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) reports 1,651 wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains as of December 31, 2010; approximately 4,269 wolves in the Western Great Lakes area as of December 10, 2010; and 50 wolves in the Southwest as of January 2011. As the gray wolf’s population has changed, so has its ESA protection. It has been classified as endangered, threatened, experimental, and even delisted, meaning that it is no longer protected under the ESA. The history of the gray wolf’s recovery (and whether it actually has recovered) is marked by conflict, with each regulatory change bringing litigation. In 2011, Congress enacted legislation which directed FWS to delist wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains.

Listing History of the Gray Wolf

Before the gray wolf was protected as a species under the ESA, the Eastern Timber wolf, the Northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf, and the Mexican wolf subspecies were protected. In 1978, protection of the wolf at the subspecies level ended. Instead, FWS listed the gray wolf species (Canis lupus) as endangered throughout the lower 48 states except Minnesota, where, because of its larger population, FWS classified it as threatened. Thus, in 1978, gray wolf protection was as depicted in Figure 1.

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4 P.L. 112-10, § 1713.
5 FWS proposed recognizing the eastern wolf (Canis lycaon) as a different species from the gray wolf (Canis lupus). 76 Fed. Reg. 25590 (May 5, 2011).
6 43 Fed. Reg. 9607 (March 9, 1978). Endangered is defined as being in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. 16 U.S.C. §1532(6). Threatened is defined as likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. 16 U.S.C. §1532(20).
Gray Wolf Experimental Populations

In 1982, Congress amended the ESA to allow experimental populations (Ex Pops) of endangered or threatened species to be reintroduced into their former habitats.\(^7\) In the case of the gray wolf, FWS planned to locate three Ex Pops in Central Idaho, Yellowstone, and the Blue Range of Arizona and New Mexico. All were deemed nonessential Ex Pops, meaning that they would be treated as threatened species under most circumstances.\(^8\) Under the ESA, a threatened species may not be killed or harmed unless it is subject to special rules that allow taking.\(^9\) FWS issued such rules for the gray wolf Ex Pops, detailing when a wolf might be killed. FWS could not have issued Special Rules if it had determined the wolves were essential and endangered.

Reintroduction has been controversial from the time Congress authorized it. For example, a rider to the Appropriations Act for 1992 banned spending any money to release wolves into Yellowstone and Central Idaho for that fiscal year.\(^10\) Eventually, 66 wolves were released into Central Idaho and Yellowstone in 1995 and 1996,\(^11\) while the Mexican gray wolf was

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reintroduced to the Blue Range beginning in 1998. Lawsuits were filed challenging the reintroduction, but courts upheld the wolf Ex Pop program in each case.

Following the reintroduction of the Mexican gray wolf, gray wolf protection was as depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Gray Wolf Protection after Reintroduction of Mexican Gray Wolf**
(Valid until May 5, 2011, except during times when FWS designated Distinct Population Segments (DPSs))

The Central Idaho and Yellowstone wolves flourished. Their population was 1,651 in 2010, which was a slight drop from their 2009 population of 1,706. The Mexican gray wolf population has not been so successful. In January 2011, the population totaled 50, which was nearly a 20% increase from 2010, but still less than the peak population of 59 in 2006.

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13 United States v. McKittrick, 142 F.3d 1170 (9th Cir. 1998) (upholding Ex Pop wolf reintroduction program); Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation v. Babbitt, 199 F.3d 1224 (10th Cir. 2000) (upholding Ex Pop wolf reintroduction program); New Mexico Cattle Growers v. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1999 WL 34797509 (D.N.M. 1999) (upholding reintroduction of Ex Pop wolves to New Mexico and Arizona); Defenders of Wildlife v. Lujan, 792 F. Supp. 834 (D.D.C. 1992) (suit to force reintroduction of wolf into Yellowstone as planned was ruled moot due to Appropriations Act).
16 FWS, Blue Range Wolf Reintroduction Area Monthly Project Updates, available at http://www.fws.gov/southwest/ (continued...)
The number of wolves in the Northwest led to Congress requiring certain wolf populations to be delisted. In 2011, FWS delisted wolves in Montana, Idaho, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, and north-central Utah in compliance with P.L. 112-10, Section 1713, although Wyoming wolves kept their Ex Pop status. The Wyoming wolves could become classified as endangered if the federal District Court of Montana finds they do not meet the statutory definition of an Ex Pop because they are no longer geographically isolated from other wolves.

### Gray Wolf Distinct Population Segments

In 1978, Congress revised the definition of *species* by introducing the term distinct population segment (DPS), which describes a population of a listed vertebrate species that is genetically distinct and has a separate range. Prior to this change, the ESA allowed species, subspecies, and groups of “smaller taxa” to be listed.

### 2003 Western, Eastern, and Southwestern DPSs

An April 2003 rule designating three gray wolf DPSs, Western, Eastern, and Southwestern, was FWS’s first regulatory initiative to decrease ESA protection of the gray wolf. Under the rule, FWS downlisted Western and Eastern DPSs from endangered to threatened and delisted gray wolves in the Southeast. FWS listed the Southwestern DPS as endangered pursuant to the rule, and retained the three Ex Pops in central Idaho, Yellowstone, and Blue Range.
Following that 2003 rulemaking, the map of gray wolf protection was as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Gray Wolf Protection after 2003 DPS Designations
(Valid until 2005 court decisions)


In 2005, two different courts held that the 2003 rule violated the ESA, primarily by the way it calculated the range of the wolf, and both courts vacated the rule.24 As a result, the wolf regained the ESA protections that existed in 1998 as shown in Figure 2.

2007 Western Great Lakes DPS and 2008 Northern Rocky Mountain DPS

On February 8, 2007, FWS designated and delisted a Western Great Lakes gray wolf DPS.25 Additionally, on that same day, FWS proposed designating and delisting a Northern Rocky Mountain DPS, if Wyoming revised its state management plan.26 If Wyoming failed to do so, significant portions of Wyoming would remain protected Ex Pop areas. In the February 2008 final rule, FWS designated a DPS consisting of the eastern third of Washington and Oregon, a small part of north-central Utah, and all of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming.27 The Ex Pops in the

27 73 Fed. Reg. 10514 (February 27, 2008).
Northern Rocky Mountain area were effectively reclassified as a DPS by the rule. Wolves not in a DPS or an Ex Pop remained endangered. At that point, gray wolf protection was as depicted in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Gray Wolf Protection after 2007-2008 DPS Designations**
(Valid until 2008 court decisions)

Source: Congressional Research Service based on 2008 data from FWS and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Notes: The data for this map are from 2008, and not based on the information published in the FWS DPS notices (72 Fed. Reg. 6058; 73 Fed. Reg. 10517), which is from 2006.

Courts rejected both DPSs. The District Court of Montana issued a preliminary injunction halting the delisting in July 2008. The court held that there was no showing that the genetic interchange among wolf packs in the area was stable enough to support delisting. Without adequate gene flow, the court noted, wolves could become inbred and perhaps endangered once more. The District Court of the District of Columbia vacated the Western Great Lakes DPS designation and the delisting rule in September 2008, holding that because the DPS program was created to enhance protection, FWS’s use of it to delist may be contrary to the ESA. In light of court orders, FWS withdrew the rules, and the wolf protection shown in Figure 2 was reinstated.

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2009 Western Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountain DPSs

On April 2, 2009, FWS again designated and delisted DPSs in the Western Great Lakes and the Northern Rocky Mountains. The boundaries of these DPSs were the same as in the 2007 and 2008 rules, except that while Wyoming was part of the Northern Rocky Mountain DPS, its wolves were not delisted. The wolves in Wyoming kept their Ex Pop status, although the rest of the Ex Pop in the Northern Rocky Mountains was extinguished by the April 2009 rule. Wolves outside of Ex Pop or DPS boundaries remained listed as endangered. Following the April 2009 rules, wolf protection was as depicted in Figure 5.

![Figure 5. Gray Wolf Protection after 2009 DPS Designations](image)

Once again, FWS withdrew the rules following lawsuits. The Montana District Court held that delisting all but the Wyoming wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountain DPS violated the ESA because the Act did not allow listing or delisting a subgroup of a DPS. After the Humane Society of the United States filed suit challenging the Western Great Lakes DPS, the parties settled. Ultimately, FWS withdrew both rules separately, and wolves returned to the protections that existed in 1998, as shown in Figure 2.

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35 74 Fed. Reg. 47483 (September 16, 2009) (Western Great Lakes); 75 Fed. Reg. 65574 (October 26, 2010) (Northern (continued...))
Subsequent litigation between the state of Wyoming and FWS led to a reexamination of Wyoming’s management plan. In November 2010, the District Court of Wyoming ordered FWS to reconsider whether Wyoming’s wolf management plan would meet recovery goals for the species to enable the state to assume management authority over its wolves.\(^{36}\)

**Conditional Settlement Agreement**

In March 2011, FWS entered a conditional settlement agreement with most of the plaintiffs that had challenged the 2009 Northern Rocky Mountain DPS rule. The agreement would have delisted wolves in Montana and Idaho provided the August 2010 decision vacating the April 2009 rule were partially withdrawn. The settling plaintiffs moved the District Court of Montana to reinstate the 2009 DPS rule as it applied to Montana and Idaho until FWS could issue a new rule. However, the court rejected the motion, effectively ending the settlement.\(^{37}\) The court held that it lacked authority under the ESA to reinstate part of the 2009 rule because it would lead to killing protected wolves.

**Gray Wolf Legislation**

In 2011, Congress enacted the first law directing FWS to delist a species. Pursuant to the Full-Year Appropriations Act of 2011, P.L. 112-10, Section 1713, Congress required FWS to reissue the April 2009 Northern Rocky Mountain DPS rule, which delisted the gray wolf in Montana, Idaho, eastern Washington, eastern Oregon, and north-central Utah. Wolves in the rest of the lower 48 states remained federally protected as either threatened or endangered. P.L. 112-10 bars judicial review of the reissued rule, but still allows subsequent FWS regulatory action, such as delisting in Wyoming, or relisting of the DPS, should the wolf’s status change. FWS reissued the April 2009 Northern Rocky Mountain DPS rule on May 5, 2011.

Enactment of P.L. 112-10, Section 1713 was significant because legislation to delist species rarely had been proposed and never had been successful.\(^{38}\) Some have argued that the law is a tipping point in species protection, and that politics and not science will dictate species protection in the future. However, Section 1713 is not a blanket delisting, but a direction to re-release a rule in which FWS determined that the best available science supported delisting those wolves. As referenced above, however, a federal court had found that FWS had violated the ESA in making this determination.


\(^{38}\) All examples were from the 100th Congress and were proposed amendments to the Endangered Species Act Amendments of 1987. They were not passed. See 133 Cong. Rec. H11248 (Concho water snake); 133 Cong. Rec. H11248 (gray wolf); and 133 Cong. Rec. H11617 (leopard darter minnow).
Wolf protection following reissuance of the April 2009 rule is as depicted in Figure 6.

**Figure 6. Gray Wolf Protection after P.L. 112-10**

Other bills before the 112th Congress also would restrict federal protection of the gray wolf. Those addressing the wolves of the West may not advance in light of P.L. 112-10. For example, Congress apparently chose P.L. 112-10, Section 1713 over the nearly identical S. 321 (Baucus), which would have given the 2009 rule the force of law rather than regulation. Additionally, H.R. 510 (Rehberg), which allows state regulation of wolves in Idaho and Montana, appears mooted by P.L. 112-10.

Other bills do not appear moot. For example, H.R. 838 (Kline) would eliminate federal protection of wolves in the Western Great Lakes area, proposing: “Any wolf in Minnesota, Wisconsin, or Michigan shall not be treated under any status of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16 U.S.C. 1531 et seq.), including as an endangered species, a threatened species, an essential experimental population, or a nonessential experimental population.” H.R. 509 (Rehberg) and S. 249 (Hatch) would amend the ESA so it would not apply to the gray wolf. Those two bills would affect all gray wolves, including the populations in the Southwest as well as the Western Great Lakes and Northern Rocky Mountain areas.

After the delisting directed by P.L. 112-10 went into effect, Representative Candice S. Miller introduced H.R. 1819 which would give states management authority over wolves provided that

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39 This language appears to mean that Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan wolves shall not be treated as protected under or covered by the ESA, but those italicized words are not in the bill. It is not clear how H.R. 838 would affect existing federal protection because of this wording.
specifies population levels were maintained. H.R. 1819 addresses all three gray wolf population centers, the Northern Rockies, the Western Great Lakes, and the Southwest. In each case, if the numbers of wolves dip below a statutorily protected amount, the Secretary of the Interior would be authorized to treat wolves as protected for at least two years after reestablishing the targeted number of wolves. Under H.R. 1819, population goals would not be based on breeding pairs but on individuals. This criterion is not as clearly related to adequate genetic diversity and reproductive capacity, and might arguably be more difficult to measure than the number of breeding pairs.41

Also, the Department of the Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for FY2012 (H.R. 2584) includes a provision that would eliminate judicial review of certain gray wolf delistings. If gray wolves in Wyoming or the Western Great Lakes are delisted, Section 119 of that bill would block judicial review of the delisting rule, provided that the Secretary of the Interior has authorized the state to manage its gray wolves.

Proposed Rulemaking: Redefining Populations, Species, and Range

On May 5, 2011, FWS proposed additional changes to gray wolf protection.42 These changes are designating a Western Great Lakes DPS and delisting it; revising the gray wolf’s historic range by eliminating parts or all of 29 eastern states from that range; initiating a five-year review for the gray wolf; initiating a status review of the gray wolf in the Pacific Northwest; initiating a status review of the Mexican wolf in the Southwest and Mexico; and recognizing a new species of wolf, the eastern wolf (Canis lycaon).43 Some of these actions seem likely to lead to further differentiated protection of wolves depending on population location. If the May 2011 proposals are adopted, gray wolf protection could resemble that of the 2003 DPS rules (see Figure 3).

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40 The bill defines gray wolf to include Canus [sic] lycaon, and Canus [sic] lupus baileyi (the Mexican wolf).
41 Lone wolves are often secretive and hide to avoid attack by resident packs.
As proposed by FWS’s May 2011 notice of rulemaking, gray wolf protection would be as depicted in Figure 7.

**Figure 7. Gray Wolf Protection Proposed by 76 Fed. Reg. 26086**


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