

July 15, 2002

Wolf Plan

Wyoming Game and Fish Department
5400 Bishop Boulevard
Cheyenne, WY 82006

On behalf of Defenders of Wildlife and our more than 430,000 members and supporters nationwide, we appreciate the opportunity to offer our input on the creation of the Wyoming state wolf management plan. We hope the final plan is one that addresses legitimate wolf-human conflict as it secures the long term recovery of wolves in Wyoming.

Founded in 1947, Defenders is a national, not for profit organization recognized as a leader in the conservation of wolves in the northern Rockies and throughout North America. One major component of our wolf conservation program has been the establishment of a compensation system, designed to minimize the economic impact of wolf recovery on individual ranchers, and build greater tolerance and acceptance for wolves. To date, we have contributed more than \$225,000 through our Bailey Wildlife Foundation Wolf Compensation Trust to reimburse livestock owners for losses to wolf depredation, including, more than \$80,000 disbursed in the Yellowstone region alone.

Beyond compensation, we believe the best method to conserve wolves is to prevent depredations before they occur through nonlethal methods. By working together with ranchers to devise deterrents to wolf predation or livestock management alternatives, we can resolve conflicts before lethal wolf control is necessary. Since 1999, Defenders has contributed over \$106,000 towards these efforts through the Bailey Wildlife Foundation Proactive Carnivore Conservation Fund. Some examples include the cost-sharing of livestock protection dogs, radio activated guard alarms, fencing, hay and alternative grazing support, and the coordination of the Wolf Guardian program to provide volunteer labor to assist in utilizing these and other nonlethal deterrents.

Though wolf depredations are very small (less than one half of one percent) in comparison to other losses, we feel this investment of our time and resources has created more tolerance for wolves and helped us form better working relationships among those who share the land with them. We continue to seek and implement new ideas that further the recovery and long term acceptance of wolves in their native territory.

Elements of a State Management Plan

In your development of a state management plan, the following elements must be included: A. Meet US Fish and Wildlife Service Standards; B. Be responsive enough to quickly adjust to population trends; C. Change the State's legal status; D. Ensure that all nonlethal measures are exhausted prior to lethal control; E. Avoid apriori designation of "wolf-free" zones; and F. Provide for continuing education and outreach both of the public and staff.

A. Meet US Fish and Wildlife Service Standards

In order for a state wolf plan to be accepted by the Department of the Interior it must meet minimum

federal statutory standards, including under the ESA, NEPA and Lacey Act. Specifically the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service mandates that:

1. Any incidental taking of wolves occurs unintentionally while conducting an otherwise lawful activity.

2. The plan includes a strategy to avoid, minimize, and mitigate any proposed incidental take.

3. The plan is adequately funded and contains provisions to deal with unforeseen circumstances.

4. Any incidental taking allowed pursuant to the plan does not appreciably reduce the likelihood of survival and recovery of wolves in the wild.

5. Assurances exist that the plan will be implemented (includes terms, conditions and monitoring).

6. States and Tribes have involved stakeholders in plan development.

4. Be responsive enough to quickly adjust to population trends

In addition to the Service's criteria, we believe the state plan must be responsive enough to allow wildlife managers the opportunity to manage for trends in the population yet guarantee enough protection that the wolf population is never placed at risk or unnecessary persecution. It will be important to work with state and tribal biologists and agencies to monitor population trends across state borders. These trends may be of great significance to long term wolf population viability and must be considered when making decisions affecting wolf numbers within the state.

Incidental take needs close monitoring and accountability as well, because such losses can dramatically affect wolf pack stability. We are in favor of strong regulations that protect wolves from intentional persecution and the plan should include provisions to monitor incidental take, allowing wildlife managers to adjust regulations if necessary. The existing Experimental Population Rule under the ESA serves as an excellent example of the type of balanced management necessary between conservation needs and management controls.

C. Change the State's legal status

Wyoming state law must also be changed to protect the wolf. Currently, state law classifies the wolf as a "predatory animal" (Wy. Stat. sec. 23-1-101(a)(viii)). Predatory animals can be killed "without a license in any manner and at any time" with few exceptions. Wy. Stat. sec. 23-3-103. These methods include aerial hunting, and permission to enter private property, even when the landowner refuses, to destroy and eradicate wolves that are a "menace to livestock." Wy. Stat. secs. 11-6-101, 11-6-105. The wolf must be removed from the definition of a predatory animal and given protected status, including substantial penalties imposed to help deter violations. We believe these penalties must be weighted toward the maximum allowed under state law and seriously enforced to ensure enough protection while the species continues to recover.

D. Ensure that nonlethal control has priority over lethal control

The plan should not allow lethal control of wolves unless all nonlethal alternatives have been exhausted. Many new deterrent devices and techniques are proving helpful and often alternative livestock management practices can help in reducing livestock depredations. A good plan would

utilize these practices and encourage continued and proactive work with all the stakeholders to implement them.

For example, wolves should not be killed for "threatening" livestock or pets. The definition of "threatening" is vague and because it is subjective would likely lead to an excess number of wolves being killed. The plan should specify that only non-lethal measures be allowed in the case of wolves threatening livestock, and the responsibility for pets lies with their owners who need to avoid conflict situations with wildlife by keeping their pets under control, especially on public lands. In all cases lethal control should only be used as a last resort when other methods have failed. It is important that livestock operators and owners also demonstrate responsible animal husbandry practices including the removal of dead livestock carcasses whenever possible, treating and removing injured or diseased animals, and avoiding active wolf den sites. Reasonable incentives for citizens working to reduce or avoid conflicts should be considered and adopted.

Hunting.— We strongly oppose the hunting of wolves during the early stages of state management, especially during the first five years. Furthermore, a hunting season on wolves should never be allowed in the spring and early summer of the year when wolves and their pups are extremely vulnerable. The primary objection to quickly reinitiating a hunting season on wolves is the need for an assurance that the population is viable, and that sufficient monitoring and protection mechanisms are in place to quickly determine the population's trends.

E. Avoid apriori designation of "wolf-free" zones

We strongly oppose the use of "No wolf" zones or unnatural limitations on wolf population size without evidence suggesting they are necessary. Wolves should be allowed to colonize naturally and without excessive control of their movements. The establishment of such zones are not only ecologically suspect but may be legally suspect as well. Rather, wolves can be discouraged from unsuitable areas - like private ranches - when problems arise.

We encourage you to include a provision for a state wolf management advisory council to continue to identify, discuss and discern management goals, conflict resolutions and public education opportunities. It's important that diverse interests are allowed full and meaningful participation in the process and we anticipate working collaboratively with the state and other participants in the future.

F. Provide for continuing education and outreach both of the public and staff

We recommend that the state begin its wolf management training prior to delisting by working with federal wolf biologists to radio-collar and monitor wolves. This would achieve three important objectives; direct experience with wolves; enhanced monitoring and protection of existing wolves; and enhanced documentation of wolf reproduction.

An enormous challenge for wolf managers is personal and societal perceptions about wolves. These perceptions affect how individuals, organizations and communities view wolves and their management. Often these perceptions are based on emotions and opinions that are contrary to known facts about wolves. As a result, wolves have often suffered from the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of their role and impact upon western landscapes. Wolf attacks on humans are extremely rare, yet the fear and representative rhetoric of such a threat still guides many to conclude

that wolves are among the most dangerous animals. Claims that wolves will destroy all wild ungulate populations or the livestock industry at large are equally unfounded.

These mis-perceptions need to be corrected as well as educating the public about the importance of predators and their benefits both to local residents and to promoting healthy, dynamic ecosystems. We encourage the use of educational outreach like the "Living with Carnivores" program which is currently being promoted throughout Washington, Oregon and Idaho and utilized as a tool for helping residents (rural and urban) learn ways to avoid conflicts with native predators. We would welcome the opportunity to help tailor and implement a similar program for Wyoming that addresses public concerns, attractants, and non-lethal control alternatives specifically related to living with wolves.

Conclusion

Early research indicates that wolves are having a positive impact on the land itself. Wolves are coursing predators, and unlike the stealth and surprise hunting technique of the cougar, they test and monitor possible prey on an active basis. During the decades that wolves have been absent from Yellowstone National Park, researchers noted that elk avoided other predators by congregating in riparian meadows where they could better avoid stealth attacks (Dekker 1997). These meadows suffered as a result of overuse, the riparian vegetation declined dramatically, and many common species disappeared including song birds, beaver, aspens, willow. The wolf's return may help restore a more natural use of these sensitive areas by deterring elk from heavy use of the riparian zones that are no longer "safe" from predation (W. J. Ripple et al 2001). With less pressure from elk, the regrowth of aspen and return of riparian dependent species has been recorded by researchers - and attributed as a probable positive benefit of the ecological impact of wolf restoration (Beschta, pers. comm. 2002).

The wolf is an important keystone species that helps restore lost biological balance to their native ecosystems (Places for Wolves. 1999). Recent research in Idaho documents that wolves will cull unhealthy elk and deer more than other native predators like mountain lions and bears (Power and Husseman, 2002). The carcasses of wolf-killed ungulates also support a number of other wildlife species including eagles, wolverine, bears, and a wide variety of smaller birds and mammals. Wolves have often been observed killing coyotes which may explain the significant expansion in coyote populations during the absence of wolves from their native habitat.

Unfortunately, the value of carnivore species like the wolf is rarely understood among those who see them only as a competitor, yet their ecological, economic, and aesthetic benefits are greatly significant to our region. The restoration of wolves has already enhanced local economies through increased tourism by local, regional, national and international visitors. Studies conducted just prior to wolf reintroduction anticipated that this influx of tourist revenues would bring a net increase of \$10 million annually (Duffield and Neher 1996) and the evident success of this income is obvious throughout the Yellowstone and Grand Teton areas. This benefit is more than twenty times the expected losses associated with wolves yet it is rarely recognized in public education or management policy decision making.

Perhaps the greatest gift that the wolf brings to us is the challenge to work with people of diverse beliefs, values, and backgrounds. How we answer this challenge says far more about us than the fairly

simple ecological return of a native species. Abuse of native species and native peoples marked the end of wolves in the West. Respect for wild creatures, especially those as controversial as wolves, signals greater depth of human tolerance and understanding - and hope that the wild aspects of America can be protected and restored. Let's leave future generations something that will ensure this effort was worthwhile and won't need to be repeated. A well-balanced plan will ensure that.

We appreciate your consideration of our comments and concerns.

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