
LESSONS FROM WOLF RESTORATION IN THE NORTHWESTERN U.S.

Ed Bangs, Retired Wolf Recovery Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Helena, MT

Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) populations were deliberately eliminated from nearly all of their historic range in the contiguous United States by 1930. Naturally dispersing wolves from Canada first denned in Montana in 1986. An intense period of scientific research, public outreach, and politics followed and resulted in wolves from western Canada being reintroduced to central Idaho and Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming in 1995 and 1996. The population grew rapidly and at least 1,600 wolves now live in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and parts of eastern Oregon and Washington (NRM). The population has been biologically recovered since December 2003 when at least 663 wolves were present but removal of federal protections was delayed for several years. Packs now occupy mountainous forested habitat in over 130,000 square miles of the NRM. Wolf restoration resulted in both benefits (public viewing, harvest opportunities, funding by tag sales, and restoration of ecological processes) and costs (agency funding, livestock and pet depredation, and competition with big game hunters). Federal, state, and tribal cooperators used a wide variety of deterrents, relocated wolves 117 times, and killed over 2,268 to reduce livestock conflicts. Wolves contributed to reducing some wild ungulate populations and harvest by hunters. Starting in 2009, states began to implement public harvest programs to provide hunter/trapper opportunity, reduce conflict, and meet other objectives. Up to one third of the minimum wolf population was legally killed by humans and as intended, it has helped stabilize the population and reduced conflicts. The NRM wolf population is now being managed similarly to other resident wildlife by the affected States (except Wyoming where litigation caused wolves to remain listed) and Native American Tribes. While the NRM wolf population is biologically healthy, controversy

continues as legal, policy, political, and human value issues continue to be debated symbolically through wolves. I discuss the history, science, and politics behind restoring wolves to the NRM and possible implications to future wolf restoration efforts.