

GRAY WOLF RESTORATION IN THE NORTHWESTERN UNITED STATES™

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Gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) populations were eliminated from the western United States by 1930. Dispersing wolves from Canada lacked legal protection until passage of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973. By 1986 a pack had naturally formed in northwestern Montana. In 1995 and 1996 wolves from western Canada were reintroduced to remote public lands in Idaho and Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming. Wolves were designated as experimental populations to increase management flexibility. Wolf population growth has occurred rapidly because of the reintroduction. Over 572 wolves were present in December 2001, and the wolf population has a young age structure meaning it has the potential for continued rapid expansion. The wolf population in the northwestern U.S. should meet the recovery goal of having 30 breeding pairs distributed throughout Montana, Idaho and Wyoming for 3 successive years by December 2002. If Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming have state wolf conservation plans in place wolves could be delisted from the ESA in 2003. Wolf restoration has proceeded more quickly and with more benefits (public viewing) and fewer problems (livestock depredations), than predicted. The impact of wolf predation on big game (primarily elk) populations is a major public concern. Several cooperative research projects have yet to detect significant impacts to wolf prey but these ongoing studies will provide accurate information to address public and agency concerns. Because over 85 percent of adult wolf mortality is human-caused, the interagency recovery program focuses its efforts on addressing the concerns of people who live near wolves to increase human tolerance. Wolves restored important ecological processes to several large wild areas in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming. The program has been widely and internationally publicized and is generally viewed as highly successful.