

Federal Officials Promise Wolf Delisting

Idaho wildlife managers are getting ready to take over full responsibility for managing wolves from the federal government.

“The wolf population in Idaho has fully recovered, and Idaho is prepared to manage the species,” Idaho Gov. Jim Risch said in a December 19 news release.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Director Dale Hall told Risch on Dec. 19 that Fish and Wildlife would publish a notice in the Federal Register by the end of January 2007 to begin the process that will remove federal protection for wolves in Idaho under the Endangered Species Act.

The news was welcomed at the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

“I think it’s wonderful,” Fish and Game Director Steve Huffaker said. “At long last it appears that the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Interior Department have recognized that wolves have recovered and should be managed like all the rest of the states’ wildlife.”

Fish and Game staff members are working on a post-delisting population management plan, he said.

If the federal government moves forward with plans to delist the species in Idaho, Fish and Game could manage wolves within its borders in a year. Officials plan to manage wolves through hunting in the same way as with other large predators, such as black bears and mountain lions.

Hall noted the Fish and Wildlife Service is preparing a two-pronged approach for delisting wolves in Idaho and Montana. One approach includes Wyoming, if its legislature approves a new management plan in their upcoming session, and the other excludes Wyoming if no progress is made.

Idaho and Montana have had management plans in place for the wolves in those states that have far exceeded recovery goals. Fish and Wildlife has rejected Wyoming’s management plan.

Risch noted that he has been pushing the delisting issue since he took office.

“Idaho should not be penalized for doing what was required, and I have continually told the federal government that,” Risch said. “We will be able to maintain a viable population of wolves in the state that is in balance with other game populations.”

Wolves in Idaho have been listed as an endangered species since 1973.

In 1995, a reintroduction program brought 35 wolves to Idaho. Today, officials estimate about 650 wolves in 70 or more packs, and 41 or more breeding pairs inhabit Idaho. Breeding pairs are defined as an adult male and female raising at least two pups through the end of year. An estimated 176 new pups were added in Idaho this year, for an estimated growth rate of about 20 percent.

In 2006, agents confirmed wolves in Idaho killed 27 cattle, 195 sheep, and four dogs—three hunting hounds and one guard dog. And about 40 wolves involved in livestock deaths and injury problems were killed by agents, seven were killed by producers protecting their stock, eight were killed illegally and 13 were killed by other causes, for a total of 68 wolves killed.

Wolf predation on elk has not yet resulted in a statewide reduction in population numbers, though some localized areas show a decrease in elk. Population counts show statewide elk numbers running between 122,000 and 125,000 animals over the past five years. Though not as high as some years in the early-to-mid 1990s, elk harvest numbers have risen in the past three years, from 18,900 elk in 2003 to 21,520 elk in 2005.

Harvest numbers for 2006 have not yet been compiled.