



WYOMING GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

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April 18, 2023

WER 5839.09

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants

Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of the Gray Wolf in Colorado

Docket No. FWS-R6-ES-2022-0100

Public Comments Processing

Attn: FWS-R6-ES-2022-0100

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

5275 Leesburg Pike

Falls Church, VA 22041

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department (Department) has reviewed the proposed rule to establish a nonessential experimental population of the gray wolf in the State of Colorado. The Department is statutorily charged with managing and protecting all Wyoming wildlife (W.S. 23-1-103). Pursuant to our mission, we offer the following comments for your consideration.

The Department does not support the reintroduction of gray wolves to the State of Colorado. The purpose and need, as described in the DEIS, for the reintroduction and concurrent 10(j) rule promulgation, to begin gray wolf reintroduction in Colorado by the end of the year, does not state a scientific basis for the proposed reintroduction action or 10(j) designation. In addition, Wyoming is dedicated to maintaining healthy wolf populations and taking wolves from Wyoming undermines our ability to maintain a viable wolf population in Wyoming.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is proposing to promulgate a section 10(j) rule, consistent with section 10 of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), to provide management flexibility for the reintroduction and management of a population of gray wolves in Colorado. Alternative 1 would provide a consistent federal regulatory framework and take provisions across the state for managing gray wolves that would be reintroduced and gray wolves living in or naturally dispersing to Colorado. This alternative would provide the management flexibility within the experimental population boundary, which would include the entire state.

2.4.1 No-Action Alternative, Detailed Description

Wyoming is included in the list of states where gray wolves are proposed to be captured for Colorado's reintroduction efforts. The Department does not support the capture of wolves in Wyoming for reintroduction to Colorado. The Department manages the number of gray wolves,

as well as the number of breeding pairs, in accordance with management objectives which have been established to maintain a sustainable population within the Wolf Trophy Game Management Area (WTGMA). The capture of Wyoming wolves adds unpredictably and may jeopardize our ability to demonstrate a recovered population.

4.5.2 Alternative 1

Alternative 1 includes an option to allow take of wolves to reduce impacts on wild ungulates. If this optional element is incorporated, the Service and its designated agents would have the flexibility to manage reintroduced wolves using nonlethal and/or lethal methods for the purposes of managing other wildlife species (e.g., elk, deer, pronghorn, moose, wild sheep, and mountain goats) consistent with established State management goals, in accordance with section 10(j) of the ESA. Take of wolves would be permitted only if the State has determined that wolf interactions are a major driver of population declines in other wildlife species and are preventing species populations from meeting established State or Tribal management objectives. If this optional element is incorporated, the Service and its designated agents would have the flexibility to manage reintroduced wolves using nonlethal and/or lethal methods for the purposes of managing other wildlife species (e.g., elk, deer, pronghorn, moose, wild sheep, and mountain goats) consistent with established State management goals, in accordance with section 10(j) of the ESA.

- The Department is supportive of the concept for the optional element described in the DEIS which allows for the take of wolves to reduce impacts on wild ungulates as determined by the State.

4.7.2 No-Action Alternative, Impact on Outdoor Recreation, Hunting

The discussion of elk populations and hunter harvest is misrepresentative of the impacts to elk hunting from gray wolf reintroductions in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem as presented at the statewide scale for the affected states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. In Wyoming, elk populations and hunter harvest in the WTGMA have decreased since gray wolves were reintroduced in the mid-1990s.

- The Department recommends the Service provide discussion in the DEIS for the trends of elk hunting in Wyoming, and more specifically within the WTGMA, similarly to the discussion presented for elk hunting trends in the state of Montana.

Table 4-2. Confirmed Wolf-Livestock Conflicts and in the Wyoming WTGMA and Seasonal WTGMA by Calendar Year and Mean Annual Depredations

The information presented in Table 4-2 is for the total conflicts in WTGMA, while the discussion of this information in the DEIS provides details for different segments of the WTGMA, as well as statewide conflicts, for 2021. This may lead to some confusion for reviewers as to how the data in the discussion and table correspond to one another.

- We recommend rewording the DEIS discussion to provide more clarification on what the Wyoming statewide conflict numbers represent (i.e. statewide includes the WTGMA).
- The Department also recommends these data are discussed and represented in the DEIS as minimum numbers, as actual conflicts are likely greater in number.

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Thank you for the opportunity to comment. If you have any questions or concerns please contact, Angi Bruce, Deputy Director, at 307-777-4689.

Sincerely,



Brian Nesvik
Director

BN/ws

cc: Chris Wichmann, Wyoming Department of Agriculture