



RICK SNYDER
GOVERNOR

STATE OF MICHIGAN
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
LANSING



RODNEY A. STOKES
DIRECTOR

June 29, 2011

Mr. Rowan Gould, Acting Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Director Gould:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed rule to delist the gray wolf and initiate status review for the eastern wolf that was published in the Federal Register on May 5, 2011. Wolves in Michigan no longer need the protection provided by the Endangered Species Act. Our assertion is supported by the following facts: 1) in Michigan, the population exceeds recovery goals, continues to expand, and no longer faces extinction; 2) laws, policies, and plans exist to conserve and manage wolves successfully in Michigan, and 3) the endangered status for a common and increasingly abundant species is causing hardship for many of Michigan's citizens. Therefore, we emphatically support delisting of wolves in Michigan.

Our goal for every endangered species is recovery. The wolf population in Michigan and Wisconsin met recovery criteria in 1999. The wolf population does not face threats to its viability and has been increasing consistently for two decades. The best available science shows that Michigan wolves are not endangered.

Delisting will not mean a lapse in conservation or management. Wolves in Michigan have been managed by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for decades. Wolves in Michigan will continue to be managed under the Michigan Wolf Management Plan, a plan praised by many of our conservation partners. In 2006, we took the risk of bringing all sides of the wolf management debate together, from ranchers to animal rights advocates to avid hunters, in a Wolf Roundtable to craft consensus recommendations for our Plan. The risk was that consensus could not be found. Thanks to the hard work of the Roundtable participants, they were able to find common ground. The risk paid off, and wolf conservation in Michigan has broad support within the state. The regulatory framework in Michigan is robust; we are ready and willing to manage the wolf population under state authority.

Treating an abundant and increasing population as if it were endangered is causing many of Michigan's citizens significant hardship. Since 2009, when wolves in the Western Great Lakes were relisted as endangered, we have recorded 204 nuisance wolf complaints, verified 106 livestock killed by wolves on sixteen farms, and documented twelve cases where wolves killed someone's pet. In some cases, lethal control of wolves could save the lives of livestock or pets. The Michigan Wolf Management Plan clearly states that lethal control of wolves is not to be undertaken lightly or indiscriminately, but that it is appropriate in some situations. Lethal control in Michigan would be regulated and would not threaten the viability of the overall wolf population. The lack of a carefully regulated lethal control option is harming Michigan citizens financially and emotionally.

This proposed rule has several strengths, but there are also areas that are inconsistent. Our position is that the approach for delisting should be consistent: consistent within the rule,

consistent with the best available science, consistent with the Endangered Species Act (ESA), and consistent with the original listing of wolves in the Western Great Lakes. Thus, the rule either needs to be clarified, or the approach needs to be modified.

The revision of the taxonomy relative to the entity that was listed is the root of the inconsistency within the proposed rule. For example, under *Procedural Aspects of Proposal Applying to the Gray Wolf (C. lupus)* (page 26094), gray wolves (*C. lupus*) are treated differently than eastern wolves (*C. lycaon*). The former is delisted while the status of the latter is reviewed. Yet on the next page (page 26095) the listed entity of *Canis lupus lycaon* is equated with *C. lycaon*. Then in the recovery discussion, Table 1, and in the threats analysis, both species and their hybrids are treated together as one population. It is our opinion that both species and their hybrids should be treated as one population throughout the proposed rule.

We recognize that the science regarding which species of wolves occur in the Western Great Lakes is not settled, but we also recognize that wolf conservation cannot be put on hold until every scientific question has a consensus answer. Last winter, we estimated that there were 687 wolves in Michigan. Various genetic analyses suggest that these canids could consist of a subspecies of gray wolves; or a population of gray wolves with coyote introgression; or a population of gray wolves, eastern wolves, and their hybrids. It is our opinion, based on the current science, that the last interpretation is best supported by the existing genetics information. On this point, we agree with the taxonomic determination in the proposed rule, but the rule must clarify that there is only one ecological population of wolves in Michigan. The available DNA evidence indicates that the hybridization of these two species occurred historically before significant human influence. In Michigan, gray wolves, eastern wolves, and their hybrids cannot be differentiated physically, occupy the same range, and function as a single population. Thus, the rule must emphasize the existence of one distinct population of wolves of mixed genetic ancestry.

In 1978, the ESA was revised to account for the rare situation where populations were an appropriate conservation target. Thus, the definition of "species" under the ESA was changed to include subspecies and "any distinct population segment of any species or vertebrate fish or wildlife which interbreeds when mature." Because gray wolves and eastern wolves and their hybrids interbreed in Michigan, they should be considered as one population. To treat the gray wolf portion of the population as distinct would not be consistent with the evidence that they interbreed with eastern wolves in this population. As a distinct population segment, the one population of wolves of mixed genetic ancestry should be recognized as one "species" as defined by the ESA, and this definition should be applied consistently throughout the delisting rule.

Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, the proposed rule to delist this population of wolves should be consistent with the original listing, the 1978 revision of the original listing, and subsequent recovery plans and recovery programs. Based on the historical wolf specimens that are available, the historical population was one population of gray wolves, eastern wolves, and their hybrids. That is what was listed (and called a subspecies, based on the best available science in 1978), and what met recovery goals in 1999, and is what should be delisted now. The key question is: did we recover what nearly went extinct? Based on the best available science, the answer is yes.

Treating gray wolves in one rule and reviewing the status of eastern wolves in another action is not consistent within the proposed rule, is not consistent with the best available science, is not

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consistent with the definition of a distinct population segment in the ESA, and is not consistent with the conservation targets that Michigan has aimed toward in good faith for the past thirty-three years. The Michigan DNR strongly supports delisting, but we feel that the only consistent approach is to delist all of Michigan's wolves in one rule as one distinct population.

Recovery is the goal of endangered species conservation. We feel the recovery of the wolf should be celebrated, and we thank you for your persistence in removing this recovered population of wolves from the federal endangered species list. If you have any further questions regarding this matter, please contact Mr. Christopher Hoving, Endangered Species Coordinator, at 517-373-3337 or you may contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rodney A. Stokes", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rodney A. Stokes
Director
517-373-2329

cc: Public Comments Processing, USFWS
Dr. Kelley Smith, Acting Natural Resources Deputy
Dr. Russ Mason, MDNR
Dr. Patrick Lederle, MDNR
Mr. Christopher Hoving, MDNR