

Prepared Statement of Virgil Moore, Director, State of Idaho Department of Fish and Game
To the House Committee on Natural Resources, Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on The Status of Federal Government's Management of Wolves
September 21, 2016

The Committee invited Idaho to share our state's perspective on federal management of wolves. Let me begin, however, by describing wolves in Idaho today under state management. In 2016, Idaho's professional wildlife biologists manage a recovered wolf population that is sustainable and prolific, and we do so in way that addresses wolf conflicts with people, pets, livestock, and Idaho's other big game populations, including elk, deer, and moose.

Idaho's wolf population continues to far exceed the recovery levels set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which were 10 breeding pairs and 100 wolves in Idaho. As our map shows, Idaho has more than 100 documented wolf packs, distributed across much of our state (see Map depicting documented and suspected wolf packs at the end of 2015). That means we have more wolf packs than the federal recovery goal was for individual wolves in our state.

Under state management, we are able to maintain this robust wolf population and reduce conflicts, primarily through public hunting and trapping. Our agency takes additional control actions to respond to specific attacks on pets and livestock, or situations where predation takes too big of a toll on local elk herds or other big game populations.

In May 2016, Idaho marked the end of federal oversight of wolf management in Idaho with our successful completion of the 5-year federal monitoring period that follows de-listing. At the end of 2015, about 800 wolves inhabited Idaho, based on intensive annual capture and radio-collaring, trail cameras, harvest reports, and reliable public observations. Similar maps of surrounding states would show a strong core population in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, with wolf dispersal and breeding packs well into Oregon and Washington and as far as California.

The federal endangered species act and federal wolf introduction into central Idaho and Yellowstone were supposed to achieve this outcome—a robust gray wolf population under state management. The tortuous path to how we ultimately achieved a state-managed, robust wolf population, however, is certainly not a model for species recovery.

In fact, I'm deeply disappointed that we needed an act of Congress to reinstate a U.S. Fish and Wildlife's decision to take wolves in Idaho and Montana off the endangered species list, nearly 10 years after federal and state agencies agreed, and the scientific community generally recognized, that the population met, and later far surpassed, federal recovery criteria.

I say that as someone who has invested over forty years—my entire professional career—as a trained biologist working for, and now leading, state wildlife management agencies, mostly in Idaho. I am the elected Vice-President of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, which represents state and territorial fish and wildlife management from across the U.S. states, as well as several Canadian provinces and Mexican states. I'm not representing AFWA today, but in my position with AFWA, I am aware of the choices my counterparts in other states face in how they engage in conservation of ESA-listed species.

If species do not come off the endangered species list when science-based recovery criteria are achieved, states and local communities have no incentive to be active participants in recovery efforts.

In fact, for species having a high potential for human conflict or other intensive management, where the costs of meeting federal monitoring and management requirements are especially high, marathon delisting processes incentivize states and local communities to sit on the sidelines of the recovery process, to actively fight proposals to list species, or to avoid expansion of listed species into unoccupied habitat.

If the federal ESA de-listing process is ultimately an exercise in moving the goalposts such that federal restrictions never really end and the federal government prescribes how states manage populations well above recovery criteria, states and local communities will question why they should invest their time and money in the enterprise. That's simply not a good incentive program for wildlife conservation.

Protracted administrative and legal de-listing delays based on procedural technicalities and armchair quarterbacking, rather than legitimate scientific or management concerns, also fuel public resentments toward the species and the ESA.

Now that Idaho has state management of a recovered, robust wolf population in Idaho, we sometimes forget where we were right before congressional intervention in 2011.

Gray wolves were listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1974. In 1987, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service developed a Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan, with recovery goals of 100 wolves and 10 breeding pairs in each of the three states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming.

In a controversial action, the federal government transplanted a total 66 wolves into Yellowstone and Central Idaho in 1995 and 1996, as a "10j" nonessential experimental population. The federal government provided assurances that there would be resources and mechanisms to address predation conflicts with livestock and elk and deer populations. These assurances did not come to fruition; what happened instead was over 10 years of largely unchecked population growth, while federal restrictions limited our ability to address a corresponding increase in wolf-human conflicts with our agricultural community and with excessive predation impacts on elk herds.

Idaho's management of elk, deer, and other wildlife gave the introduced wolves a good food supply. Demonstrating the gray wolf's ability to reproduce and disperse, Idaho's wolf population had already passed the 100-wolf recovery goal in 1998, within three years of introduction. By 2002, the Fish and Wildlife Service recognized that the Northern Rocky Mountain gray wolf population was recovered, and that de-listing was appropriate. The Service eventually issued a final rule de-listing the population in 2008, but a federal district court ordered wolves back on the list, citing deficiencies in the Service's reliance on Wyoming's state management plan. The Service de-listed the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf population outside of Wyoming in 2009, but the federal district court ordered wolves put back on the list, again citing procedural deficiencies with the federal agency de-listing, rather than biological ones.

Not only did lawsuits and protracted administrative process thwart the transfer to state management that was supposed to happen upon recovery, they also hampered our ability to use tools like the ESA's 10j rule, which the federal government had said states would be able to use to respond to conflicts where predation was taking too big a toll on our elk herds.

Certain advocacy groups sought to leverage legal and administrative roadblocks to increase federal requirements for minimum population size, hunting moratoriums, and other post de-listing

management restrictions. Federal funding was insufficient to meet our wolf monitoring and management responsibilities. Advocacy group compensation programs for wolf predation on livestock were short lived and inadequate to cover all losses associated with the growing conflicts. After our efforts to improve this incredibly frustrating situation came to an impasse, in late 2010 Idaho's governor notified the Fish and Wildlife Service that we were ending our state's participation in wolf management until wolves were delisted.

Fortunately, Congress intervened to reinstate the Fish and Wildlife Service final rule to delist wolves in part of the Northern Rocky Mountains, including Idaho, in 2011.

Under state management, we have substantially reduced wolf predation on livestock. In 2010 there were 109 wolf depredation incidents on livestock in Idaho with 75 cattle and 148 sheep confirmed killed. In 2015 there were 55 depredation incidents with 35 cattle and 125 sheep confirmed killed. We have demonstrated that a combination of regulated public wolf hunting and trapping seasons, and agency-directed control to address specific livestock predation situations, have been effective at reducing these conflicts. This is consistent not only with our state wildlife management policy, but also the original commitments of federal wolf recovery to mitigate financial impact of wolf predation on ranching families.

In contrast, where wolves remain under federal management and under protection of the ESA in Wyoming, wolf depredations on livestock have continued to increase. In 2010, 26 cattle and 33 sheep were confirmed killed by wolves. That impact has grown to 105 cattle and 103 sheep killed in 2016 through the first week of September.

In closing, I again draw your attention to the map I referred to at the beginning of my statement.

As the map shows, the recovered wolf population under state management is distributed throughout Idaho's forest lands. The federal recovery criteria was 100 individual wolves in Idaho, we have 100 documented packs, roughly 800 wolves at the end of last year.

In Idaho, we manage populations of both predator and prey species so they are sustainable, and so they do not need federal protection. In Idaho, public hunting is important to our culture and our management. We sustainably manage elk, mule and white-tailed deer, moose, wolves, mountain lions, black bears, a variety of game birds, and many other species of fish and wildlife.

Our nation has long recognized that managing wildlife and conflicts between wildlife and people, as well as reconciling different public values about wildlife, is the traditional province of state police powers. Federal management of migratory birds, endangered species, and federal enclaves such as Yellowstone National Park, serve as the exceptions and not the rule.

It should not take an act of Congress to return a species to state management once it is clearly no longer threatened or endangered. And if states and local communities know it is going to take an act of Congress to return management decisions to them despite their investing a lot of energy and financial resources on a single species, most sensible people with lots of priorities to choose from are going to choose elsewhere. Wolf management in Idaho should be an ESA success story, but what it took to get to this point is also a cautionary tale for those of us who care deeply about wildlife conservation.