

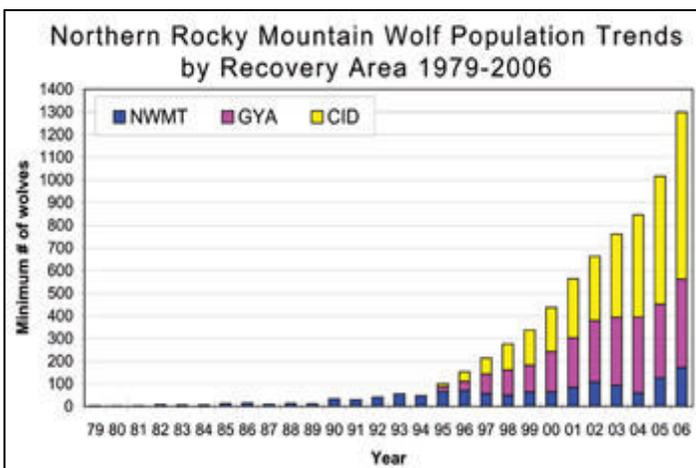
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3. WOLVES: Rockies population reached 1,300 in 2006

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

An annual count of gray wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountain area shows that there are now about 1,300 wolves in at least 173 packs (two or more adults) living in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Some 86 of those packs include a breeding pair -- defined as a male and female adult and two or more pups -- making 2006 the seventh year in a row in which more than 30 breeding pairs have been documented.

The interagency 2006 report, released by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on March 16, documents the continued population increases since wolves were formally reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park and environs in 1995 and 1996. According to Ed Bangs, FWS's gray wolf recovery coordinator in Montana, growth has been occurring at more than 25 percent per year for the past several years, pushing the number of wolves well beyond what managers had initially considered a saturation point.



This chart illustrates the growth in wolf populations since 1979 at three federally managed recovery areas in the Northern Rocky Mountain region. Courtesy of FWS.

"I didn't think we'd get over 1,000 wolves," Bangs told *Land Letter* this week. "I'm surprised it keeps growing, but it can't keep on the way it's been going."

A year ago, FWS estimated that 1,020 wolves lived in the region.

There are three distinct populations of wolves for recovery purposes, with 739 wolves in the Central Idaho Recovery Area, 390 in the Greater Yellowstone Recovery Area and 171 in the Northwest Montana Recovery Area.

Counted by state boundaries, the figures are 673 in Idaho, 311 in Wyoming and 316 in Montana.

In all, the federal government has spent \$24.2 million on wolf recovery in the Northern Rockies since 1973. That does not include about \$200,000 per year spent by the National Park Service for wolf monitoring, and more than \$575,000 spent by the USDA Wildlife Services for investigating reports of suspected wolf damage.

If wolves were continued to be listed, FWS estimated it would cost the government \$2.95 million per year for recovery and monitoring.

Increasingly, though, as wolves disperse from the original three recovery areas, "populations increasingly resemble and function as a single large meta-population," stated the report.

What that means, Bangs explained, is that instead of expanding the outer boundaries of the recovery areas,

wolves are filling in the habitat. While there is not quite as much intermingling of the wolves from different areas, there is more interaction among the packs.

Those that try to establish habitats outside the current boundaries fare less successfully, he said, because there is less suitable hunting and greater chance of human conflicts.

'More depredation and more need for control'

The report also confirmed that contrary to the great fears about livestock depredation in the region surrounding the recovery areas, the wolves largely subsist on elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, moose and bison. During 2006, there were 184 cattle, 247 sheep, 8 dogs and 2 llamas confirmed killed by wolves. The year before confirmed wolf kills involved 97 cattle, 243 sheep and 11 dogs.

While cattle mortality increased, Bangs said it is "infinitesimally small" compared to total livestock mortality from other causes. Prior to reintroduction of wolves, he said, as many as 8,400 cattle and 13,000 sheep deaths were reported each year from a variety of causes. "Wolf depredation isn't even a measurable percentage," he said. "But it seems that the same guys get hit year after year. That's why we take it seriously and remove wolves."

Looked at it from another angle, it appears that about one-quarter of the 173 known wolf packs were involved in depredation of livestock.

Last year, federal agents killed 143 wolves, up from 103 in 2005. On a percentage basis, over the past three years, the amount of wolves killed by humans increased from 8 percent to nearly 12 percent of the total population.

"One of the unfortunate aspects of successful recovery is that there's more depredation and more need for control," Bangs said.

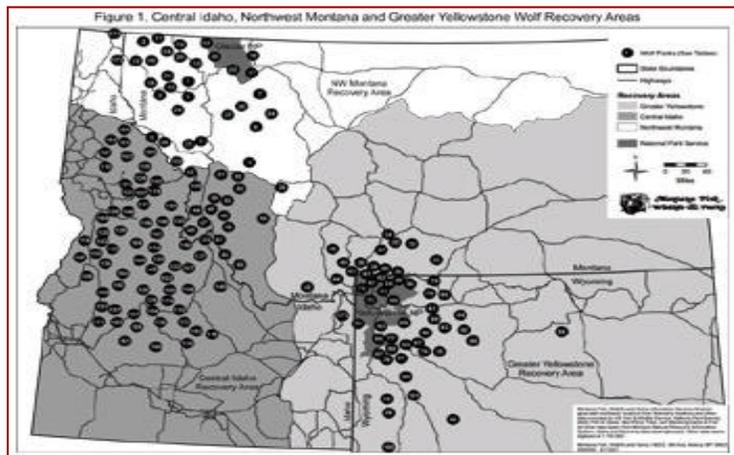
Besides federal grants to states to compensate lost livestock, the group Defenders of Wildlife pays owners an average \$84,000 per year in compensation for confirmed and probable wolf killing of livestock in the three states. From 1987 through 2006, Defenders of Wildlife has paid a total \$700,000, said FWS.

FWS is reaching the end of a long series of public comment sessions on its plan for removing wolves from the Endangered Species Act list later this year. The agency has received over 50,000 comments -- with equally strong feelings on both sides of the issue -- regarding the proposal to turn continuing management of the wolves over to the states ([Land Letter](#), Feb. 1).

The proposal has not included Wyoming, which has been embroiled in litigation with FWS over the delisting proposal. State lawmakers recently passed a bill that would allow the governor to work out a management plan with the federal government, but Bangs said the agency did not want to wait until Wyoming's plan was finalized before proceeding with delisting in the rest of the region.

"The controversy will never go away," Bangs said. "Eventually people will decide where wolves are allowed to live."

He suggested that the current proposal may be modified as a result of the public comments, but it is still expected to take effect this year. The last public hearing will be in Cody, Wyo. in mid-April, he said. The comments period closes May 9.



As numbers of wolves increase, three distinct habitats are merging into one meta-population, wolf recovery managers report. Map courtesy of FWS. Click on the image to view a larger version of the map.