Issue Statement
Wolf Restoration and Management in the Contiguous United States

Gray wolves (*Canis lupus*; hereafter, wolf) were once distributed throughout most of North America. The Mexican wolf (*Canis lupus baileyi*), a subspecies of wolf, is a separate entity from the *Canis lupus* species and is listed as endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended.

By the 1970s, in deference to social objectives, such as livestock production, enhancement of big game populations, and perceived threats to human health and safety, wolves were deliberately extirpated from Mexico, most of their historic range in the contiguous U.S., and parts of Canada and Alaska. As a result, wolves in the contiguous U.S. were listed under the ESA in 1978. However, in recent years, wolves have recolonized some areas throughout Alaska and Canada with recovery in subpopulations that possess adequate habitat conservation and management (e.g., typically areas with limited human development that are not used for intensive livestock production). Those areas now support >70,000 wolves. Other historic subpopulations have not seen such success due in part to constraints brought on by human intolerance and fragmentation of once occupied range by human activities.

Both the Northern Rocky Mountains distinct population segment (DPS) and the Western Great Lakes subpopulation of wolves are well-connected southern extensions of the wolf population in Canada. Wolves in the Northern Rocky Mountains DPS, except in Wyoming, were delisted from the ESA by Congress in 2011 when it reinstated the 2009 U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) delisting rule that had previously been overturned in federal court. Wolves in Wyoming were delisted in 2017 after the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals overturned a 2014 lower court ruling that invalidated original plans by FWS to delist the state's population in 2012.

In 2007, FWS decided to delist wolves in the Western Great Lakes from ESA, but that decision was overturned by the courts in 2008. In January 2012, FWS once again delisted the Western Great Lakes subpopulation and classified it as a DPS, stating the subpopulation had continuously exceeded recovery criteria since at least the early 1990s. This decision once more resulted in litigation, and the Western Great Lakes subpopulation was relisted under the ESA by court order in December 2014.

Beginning with a captive population of seven wolves in the 1990s, the Mexican gray wolf population in the southwestern U.S. grew to 114 in 2017 due to translocations, captive breeding, and reintroductions. In 2017, FWS also released an updated Mexican Wolf Recovery Plan, which outlined recovery criteria to down list and eventually delist the population from the ESA.

Wolf restoration in the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes succeeded because of connectivity among secure wolf populations, large blocks of land that could support persistent packs, conflicts minimized by agency management, and adequate tolerance by local residents — a combination of conditions that is uncommon elsewhere. Wolves do not need wilderness or protected lands to thrive, but they do best with few wolf-human conflicts in large blocks of

wildlands without intensive livestock production. Attempts to reestablish viable wolf populations outside of the Northern Rocky Mountains, the Western Great Lakes, or the Southwest will be more challenging due to limited connectivity to larger, secure wolf populations.

The ESA played an essential role in restoring wolves to the Northern Rocky Mountains and Western Great Lakes and continues to do so in the Southwest. However, this legislation is not intended to be, nor is it the most effective tool for long-term management of biologically recovered wolf populations or to conserve wolves in some areas where establishing self-sustaining population is unlikely. Wolf conservation requires a variety of management efforts that range from protection in areas such as national parks, enforcement of the ESA to enhance recovery of listed populations, state, provincial, and tribal management of resident wolf populations, and deterrence of wolves from areas where their presence is not desirable due to unacceptable levels of conflict with humans.

Scientific research can help provide accurate information about wolf biology and the likely effects of various management options. Science, including the human dimensions of wildlife management, should be an important part of decision making about wolf conservation. The Wildlife Society continues to advocate for appropriately using science in wolf conservation and recognizes that all branches of government and many others with expertise (i.e., stakeholders), and the public, have a vested interest in these populations. Scientific expertise and data, however, should be clearly distinguished from advocacy positions and human values in debates about wolf conservation.

The policy of The Wildlife Society regarding wolves in the contiguous U.S. is to:

1. Endorse the FWS's delisting of gray wolf populations from ESA so long as recovery targets continue to be met and demographic thresholds are maintained.

2. Recognize that state and provincial or tribal fish and wildlife agencies are the responsible authorities for conserving and managing wolf populations in their respective jurisdictions and encourage those agencies to use sound science in designing and implementing wolf management programs.

3. Recognize that wolves occupy an important ecological niche and should be conserved in portions of their original range in North America where areas of sufficient size, vegetation type, and natural prey base exist to support a population; natural ecological processes are desired; conflicts are minimal or can be minimized through management actions; and there is adequate public support for wolf restoration.

4. Recognize the existence of wolf-human conflicts (e.g., domestic animal depredation) and that many wolf populations will require active management to be tolerated by local residents.

5. Encourage continued work with Canada and Mexico to maintain adequate connectivity with U.S. wolf populations and to support wolf conservation in all appropriate areas of North America.

6. Promote habitat conservation that sustains adequate space for the life history characteristics of wolves and their wild prey, including wolf population structure and predator-prey dynamics.

7. Encourage scientific agencies and organizations to clearly distinguish biology and science from issues that have an ethical, political, or legal foundation when establishing positions or providing information on wolf conservation and management.

The Wildlife Society's *Position Statement on The U.S. Endangered Species Act* states the Society's support for "the development of recovery plan biological objectives, quantitative interim and final recovery targets, and assessments of whether an implementation strategy is likely to achieve biological goals, with a broader set of participants contributing to the development of an implementation strategy to achieve those goals" (TWS 2017).

Approved by TWS Executive Committee December 2019