

Wolf Conservation and Management in Montana

How does Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks monitor the wolf population?

Monitoring the wolf population is one of the most important aspects of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) wolf program. Monitoring efforts are closely intertwined with everything else FWP wolf staff do as a part of their job responsibilities, such as working directly with private landowners and doing public outreach.

Wolf monitoring is accomplished using a variety of tools and techniques, as is the case for other wildlife species. Common wolf monitoring techniques include direct counts, howling and track surveys, and wolf reports. Individual radio-collared wolves are used to monitor the movements and sizes of individual wolf packs.

FWP made a concerted effort in 2005 to invite the public, private landowners, and other agencies to help monitor wolves by sharing information about wolves or wolf sign they observed. FWP follows up on these reports to look for patterns or clusters, which in turn direct and prioritize field efforts. Wolf reports are also analyzed with respect to the proximity to livestock and the potential for conflicts.

The reports often confirm knowledge about existing packs -- colors and numbers of wolves. These reports also can eventually lead to verification of new packs. We also work with other agencies to supplement our knowledge. We exchange information with USDA Wildlife Services (WS) regularly. In addition to the FWP wolf program personnel, we utilize volunteers who also systematically search areas where we have a cluster of wolf reports but no known pack is in the area.

How does FWP capture wolves and prioritize field efforts?

Wolf capture work is typically done using ground-based equipment and the effort can be very time consuming. We are most successful when trapping near den sites, rendezvous sites, or on kills -- all situations when the pack is anchored to a more localized area. Ground based trapping can only be done when night time temperatures remain above freezing and soil moisture conditions permit. The field season typically runs from April or May to mid-October.

For uncollared packs, a great deal of scouting must be done before a trap is ever set. This involves hiking, use of horses, ATV's or bicycles etc. to find concentrated wolf sign or localized activity. If we find concentrated sign or fresh evidence of localized activity, we establish a trap line.

A trap line typically consists of 6-12 traps spaced across a large enough area to get geographic coverage, but close enough that they can be checked every day, twice a day as the summer progresses. Trap lines are typically run for up to two weeks as the law of diminishing returns sets in. If nothing is captured in that time, it is best to pull the line, head to the next pack, and return later in the season.

A handful of packs lend themselves to aerial darting during winter. This method is typically reserved for packs in which there is already a collar. A fixed wing plane is used to find the pack and then the helicopter carrying the person shooting the dart rifle is guided in at the very last possible moment. Darting is seldom tried for uncollared packs due to the significant expense of helicopter time and the low odds of opportunistically finding wolves. There are some rare instances in which FWP and WS have gotten lucky and opportunistically found wolves and then successfully darted. This is the exception rather than the rule.

ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL
March 17, 2006
Exhibit 7

When a wolf is captured, we collect data about the animal, draw blood, etc. Most animals are fitted with a radio collar. Some, however, are released without one because they are too small to wear a radio collar. Capturing and radio-collaring an individual wolf can cost between \$3000 and \$5000, but often it costs more than that.

We balance a variety of factors, including our obligations under SB461, weather conditions, time of year, amount of wolf sign, the potential for success in one area relative to other trapping priorities, the proximity of the pack to livestock and the potential for conflicts. If odds for a successful capture are low or risk to livestock is low, we will redirect efforts elsewhere and come back again later in the season. Priorities can shift as the field season progresses based on public and landowner reports, wolf activity, conflicts, and weather conditions.

Wolf populations generally grow by increasing the number of wolf packs, not necessarily by increasing the number of wolves in existing packs, although that happens, too. New wolf packs typically form during the peak dispersal window and during the breeding season which (combined) extends from December through February and March.

We rely, in part, on wolf reports from the public, landowners, and agency personnel to alert us to the possibility of new packs forming during the early winter months. We then prioritize our efforts for the upcoming field season based on the potential new packs and the radio-collar status of existing packs.

How is the size of the population estimated?

FWP uses a combination of ground tracking, howling surveys, and observations from the ground and from aircraft to monitor a pack and to determine its size. Our information is supplemented with public and landowner reports. The best information available is used.

The statewide population is estimated by counting the number of wolves in packs + lone dispersing animals that we know about at the end of the calendar year. This is a minimum count.

How is Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks implementing SB461?

FWP collaborates with a variety of agencies, private landowners, and the public to collar wolves and monitor the population. Private landowner and public reports assist in locating wolf activity in new areas and confirming wolf activity that we already knew about. Actual trapping and collaring work is done by FWP and USDA WS to monitor the population and to facilitate lethal control of problem wolves:

- FWP is responsible for monitoring the population; telemetry is an important tool
- WS assists by collaring wolves involved in depredations
- WS is prepared to opportunistically dart wolves while doing aerial coyote work
- FWP collaborates with National Park Service and tribes to collar packs of mutual interest and responsibility

Trapping and monitoring is very time consuming and occupies the majority of FWP's field specialists' time. It is also very expensive. However, wolf packs in Montana are extremely dynamic. This is due to the combination of wolf dispersal from their packs, natural mortality and human-caused mortality. In addition, the collars themselves have a limited battery life. Twenty-three wolves were radio collared in calendar year 2005 by FWP and WS. In the same year, 14 collared wolves died. There can be at least a 25% turnover in the collared sample of the wolf population in any given year.

FWP's program is funded with federal dollars through direct U.S. Congressional appropriations and money allocated by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. WS participation in the program is also funded through Congressional appropriations. In federal fiscal year 2005, FWP received \$607,000 and slightly more is expected in federal fiscal year 2006. The vast majority of that money supports the work of the wolf management specialists in the field.

Of the 46 packs in Montana at the end of 2005, 67% (31 of 46) had at least one radio collar. Of the 15 packs that do not:

- 8 packs -- lived in remote wilderness or backcountry areas or on Indian reservations
- 4 packs -- trapped unsuccessfully by FWP, WS or both
- 2 packs -- verified late in the year and will be prioritized for 2006
- 1 pack - the collared animal died and wolf activity seemed to dissipate; renewed activity was verified through snow tracking at the end of the calendar year

Each of our wolf specialists average 1-2 flights per month, year round. This is dependent on weather and aircraft availability. In most cases, it takes more than one flight to locate each pack one time because of how spread out the packs are. In 2005, FWP conducted at least 90 radio-tracking flights. Additional monitoring of collared animals takes place from the ground.

The summary flight reports are now available on the FWP website.

How did FWP involve the public during the development of the state's wolf plan?

The foundations of the state plan were established by the original Montana Wolf Advisory Council, a diverse group of 12 citizens called together by former Governor Marc Racicot in spring 2000. The Council deliberated issues and completed a set of guiding principles by December 2000. Their "Report to the Governor" is available on the FWP website.

Incoming Governor Judy Martz directed FWP to craft a management plan based on the work of the Council. FWP did that and also consulted with the Council along the way. Because wolf management is a controversial resource management question and there is the potential for different management alternatives to affect the human environment, FWP decided to prepare a full environmental impact statement.

In the spring of 2002, FWP staff traveled throughout Montana to hold a series of community work sessions. FWP asked the public to identify their issues and concerns about wolf management and the work of the Wolf Advisory Council. FWP also accepted written correspondence and email comments during the 60-day scoping period. FWP received approximately 6,800 comments.

FWP analyzed the comments and crafted a range of alternatives. They ranged from "No Action" to the preferred "Council Alternative" for management of a delisted population, to more conservative management approach than the Council Alternative, to a more aggressive management approach than the Council's work. Lastly, the "Contingency Alternative" presented an option that addressed the potential for a delay in delisting. This alternative outlined a scenario in which FWP would assume management responsibilities prior to delisting should the other two states not complete acceptable management plans.

FWP held a second round of public comments on the Draft EIS in the spring of 2003. FWP hosted 13 community work sessions around the state and presented the range of alternatives. FWP also accepted written comments and email comments. FWP asked the public if the Council's management plan (FWP's identified preferred alternative) adequately addressed their issues and concerns, why or why not, and what they would change about the alternative so that it did fully address their concerns. FWP also solicited comments about the Contingency Alternative at the same time. About 5,400 comments were received on the draft EIS.

FWP's original Wolf EIS Record of Decision (ROD) was signed in September 2003. However, in January 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced that delisting in the northern Rockies would be delayed. FWP consulted with FWP Commissioners, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the

Montana Wolf Advisory Council, the Montana Congressional Delegation, the Montana Governor's Office and others early in 2004.

FWP Director Hagener signed the Amended ROD in May 2004. The FWP Commission concurred with the action as well. The amended ROD selects the Contingency Alternative as FWP's alternative for as long as wolves remain listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. It directs FWP to implement the state's approved wolf management plan to the extent allowed by federal regulations through a cooperative agreement.

A complete chronology of events is available on the FWP website site.

Highlights of FWP's first year managing wolves

FWP and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service completed a cooperative agreement in June 2005 that covers the entire state. FWP now leads wolf monitoring, directs conflict management, coordinates and authorizes research, and leads outreach efforts.

FWP released it's first annual wolf program report on March 9, 2006. It is available on the FWP website. See www.fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf.

2005 Montana Wolf Packs

(as of December 31, 2005 and as published in the Montana Gray Wolf Conservation and Management 2005 Annual Report. More accurate maps available at www.fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/wolf.)

