

WOLVES IN NORTHWEST WYOMING

January 2009

On December 10, 2008 I sent an email to our membership regarding the continuing wolf controversy here in Wyoming and asking for the opinion of our members concerning the issue. While the response was not overwhelming, those members who did take the time to respond were all of the opinion that the State of Wyoming needs to revise our current legislation and Wolf Management Plan to eliminate the dual classification of wolves and designate them as trophy game animals statewide. The de-listing of gray wolves in Wyoming has been (and continues to be) delayed as a result of our current wolf management plan and Wyoming's apparent inability to come up with a management plan that is deemed to be satisfactory to the USFWS and the court.

The Casper Star-Tribune carried an article on Friday, December 26, 2008 stating that the USFWS has now delayed de-listing of wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains until sometime in 2009 and that de-listing in Wyoming is contingent upon revision of our current legislation and Wolf Management Plan. Two groups in Wyoming have actively opposed removal of the dual classification of wolves and one of these groups has indicated that they will seek a legal remedy to maintain the dual classification of wolves in the State of Wyoming. While I understand the reluctance of some in the livestock industry to accept wolves as a trophy game animal, we are in a situation where the longer it takes to de-list wolves and turn the management thereof over to the state, the more our big game populations in the northwestern corner of the state will suffer. In this regard, Wyoming has seen a dramatic decline in elk recruitment in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) since wolves were re-introduced into Yellowstone National Park (YNP) in 1995. In the Cody elk herd, calf/cow ratios have dropped from an average of 35 calves per 100 cows between 1985 and 1994 to 15 calves per 100 cows in 2005 (a 57% decline). Other elk populations within the "wolf recovery area" have demonstrated similar declines in recruitment as follows (see footnote below):

- Clarks Fork Elk Herd: average of 38 calves per 100 cows (1985-1994) pre-wolf to 20 calves /100 cows in 2005 (a 47% decline);
- Gooseberry Elk Herd: average of 37 calves/100 cows (1985-1994) pre-wolf to 14 calves/100 cows in 2005 (a 62% decline);
- Green River Elk Herd: average of 36 calves/100 cows (1985-1994) pre-wolf to 24 calves/100 cows in 2005 (a 33% decline);
- Jackson Elk Herd: average of 34 calves/100 cows (1985-1994) pre-wolf to 22 calves/100 cows in 2005 (a 35% decline) ; and
- Wiggins Fork Elk Herd: average of 44 calves/100 cows pre-wolf to 29 calves/100 cows in 2005 (a 34% decline).

Calf/cow ratios that run around 25 calves/100 cows can sustain a limited sport harvest on an annual basis; however, once calf/cow ratios reach levels of 16 calves/100 cows or less, little if any sport harvest can be maintained in that herd.

Clearly the expanding wolf population is slowly but surely eliminating (both literally and figuratively) our elk hunting opportunities in NW Wyoming. Montana hunters have already seen their elk hunting opportunities in the Gardiner area north of YNP slip away. Elk populations in the northern Yellowstone herd have declined by approximately 65% between 1994 and 2006 and recruitment in the Gallatin Canyon herd has dropped to eight calves per 100 cows. This precipitous drop in the northern Yellowstone herd has resulted in a concomitant drop in hunting permits issued in the Gardiner area, with elk tags now limited to 160 permits issued by the State of Montana for the late season Gardiner elk hunt in 2006. This same thing is happening in NW Wyoming with reductions in limited quota elk permits in the late season hunts along the Absaroka Front west of Cody and in Sunlight Basin. With elk recruitment rates dropping significantly in the GYE and the overall elk population aging, it is only a matter of time before the population reaches a point where hunting is severely curtailed in an effort to maintain viable elk populations - unless we control the wolves. We have already experienced declines in recruitment of elk in populations surrounding YNP of 33 to 62 percent, these population declines will not only continue in the GYE but will expand to adjacent herds if immediate action is not taken to de-list wolves and allow for state management of the wolf population. It is probably already too late for moose populations in the GYE.

We are at a critical juncture in this process – the Wyoming legislature will convene this month and if the members of said legislature are not convinced to change the legislation to eliminate the dual classification, then de-listing will be delayed for yet another year pending legislative action in 2010. In the meantime, the wolves will continue to breed and eat at our expense. I would encourage you to contact you local legislators and express your concern about the current management plan and the need to revise the legislation and Wolf Management Plan to designate wolves as trophy game animals state wide. It is time for the sportsmen and women of Wyoming to stand up and be heard loud and clear on this issue.

Footnote: [population data above courtesy of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department.](#)