

population of gray wolves will persist if protections of the Endangered Species Act were removed. To provide that assurance, the states of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming developed wolf conservation and management plans and adopted other regulatory mechanisms in state law.

In late 2003, all three states submitted wolf management plans to the Service for review. Based on the Service's independent review of the state management plans and state law, analysis of the comments of independent peer reviewers and the states' responses to those reviews, the Service approved the Montana and Idaho management plans as being adequate to assure maintenance their state's share of the recovered tri-state wolf population. Wyoming's plan, however, was not approved. The Service can not propose delisting until the Wyoming plan can be approved.

At this time, a Service proposal to delist gray wolves in the northern Rocky Mountains is delayed indefinitely. Even though the Service invited active state participation throughout the recovery efforts, MTFWP had previously declined active field involvement. However, the approved state plan now provides clear direction for wolf conservation and management activities by MTFWP and Montana is prepared to assume management authority to the maximum extent possible under federal regulations.

III. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

This Agreement between the Service and MTFWP is entered into in order to facilitate and enable increased participation by MTFWP while wolves remain listed and to further the conservation and recovery of the gray wolf. MTFWP will begin to implement its Service-approved state conservation and management plan to the extent possible and according to the federal guidelines established by the nonessential experimental population rule 50 CFR 17.40(n) for the 2005 10j experimental population area across southern Montana and by the 1999 Wolf Control Plan for endangered gray wolves in northern Montana. MTFWP will assume the leadership of the program both at the field implementation and decision-making level for wolves throughout Montana. Because half of Montana lies within the endangered area and half lies within the experimental population area, this Agreement will conserve a recovered wolf population, help assure standardized implementation of federal rules, policies, and the state wolf plan throughout Montana while wolves remain listed, and assure a smooth transition to state-led conservation and management upon delisting.

The Montana wolf plan underwent extensive public comment and scientific review. It provides for transparent, consistent decision-making within the confines of the federal rules and is generally supported by the public. This Agreement will allow Montana to make discretionary decisions within the scope of federal regulations and policies throughout Montana. The 2005 10j nonessential experimental population rule and the 1999 Interim Wolf Control Plan also underwent extensive public comment and peer review and provide a mechanism for wolf conservation and management under the ESA and provide clear guidance to direct MTFWP activities. The professional depth and state-wide distribution of the MTFWP organization will provide for more resources to