

DRAFT MONTANA PROTOCOL TO ADDRESS WOLF-LIVESTOCK CONFLICTS

DRAFT – August 9, 2012 - DRAFT

Gray wolves are firmly established on the Montana landscape. Given delisting of wolves in Montana, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is moving forward with fully implementing the state management framework. Montana's management plan outlines an adaptive management framework in which the size of wolf population directs more conservative or liberal management with respect to regulated wolf hunting opportunity and the use of lethal control to address wolf-livestock conflicts.

Response protocols that are most likely to succeed in removing depredating wolves are those that are implemented closely in time and space to where the damage occurred. Any protocol is most effective if problem wolves are successfully removed from the population and additional damage is avoided. Therefore, it is the intent of FWP to allow Wildlife Services to identify and take depredating wolves within the vicinity of confirmed livestock kills so long as depredation removal efforts are transparent to the public and clearly directed towards offending wolves. It is not intended to mean automatic full pack removal although full pack removal is available if circumstances warrant. Nor is it intended to substitute removal for collaring given the legislative mandate for collars and recognizing those circumstances where problem wolves may be difficult to determine with reasonable certainty. It is intended to improve efficiency and effectiveness of animal damage management while still meeting all of the objectives of Montana's wolf management program, including:

1. *Maintain a viable and connected wolf population in Montana.*
2. *Maintain authority for State of Montana to manage wolves.*
3. *Maintain positive and effective working relationships with livestock producers, hunters, and other stakeholders.*
- 4a. *Reduce wolf impacts on livestock.*
- 4b. *Reduce wolf impacts on big game populations.*
- 4c. *Maintain sustainable hunter opportunity for wolves.*
- 4d. *Maintain sustainable hunter opportunity for ungulates.*
5. *Increase broad public acceptance of sustainable harvest and hunter opportunity as part of wolf conservation.*
6. *Enhance open and effective communication to better inform decisions*
7. *Learn and improve as we go.*

This protocol will be assessed in not more than one year to determine its effect on overall effectiveness relative to livestock losses, agency response times and related costs, and the wolf population itself.

If the statewide wolf population at end of previous calendar year is estimated to be > 15 breeding pairs AND the cause of livestock depredation is CONFIRMED as wolf

- Upon confirmation of wolf as the cause of livestock depredation, FWP authorizes Wildlife Services to responsibly identify, target and remove offending wolves, using all approved methods, including aerial gunning.

- Authorization is valid for a period of 45 days from the date of confirmation. If additional depredations occur and are confirmed, the authorization period will start over.
- Wildlife Services shall make every effort to avoid lethal removal of non-problem wolves in areas near and adjacent to the site of depredation.
- If the depredation occurs in an area without a collared pack and WS cannot determine which pack/wolves were involved, the first priority is to attempt to collar at least one wolf in the area. If an uncollared pack/wolves can be linked to the depredation, lethal removal up to and including full pack removal may be applied.
- Within 24 hours of confirmation and initiation of control or collaring efforts, Wildlife Services must 1) contact the FWP Wolf Specialist for that area and provide the following information: Date of depredation, date of investigation, number and type of livestock killed or injured, location of depredation, county of depredation, land ownership, pack name (if known), intended control action, and producer.
- By 5:00 pm each Tuesday after control or collaring efforts are initiated, Wildlife Services must notify the wolf specialist of any wolves collared or removed during the prior week. The associated information will include pack name, depredation complaint (location, county, producer), number of wolves removed, number of wolves collared, frequencies, and status of the complaint (completed/ongoing).
- Within 48 hours following termination of control efforts by Wildlife Services, Wildlife Services must notify the wolf specialist that control/collaring efforts are being terminated and provide a summary of final control results, including pack name, number, gender and age class of wolves collared and collar frequencies, number of wolves taken, gender and age class of wolves taken, method of take, summary justification for any removals of specific wolves/packs, and any additional information requested by the wolf specialist. This information will be placed into FWP databases by FWP personnel.
- WS shall collect genetic samples from controlled wolves and coordinate delivering them to FWP.
- There is an expectation of regular communication between MFWP and Wildlife Services field staffs throughout the duration of an animal damage management response so that both agencies are informed and aware of any special circumstances.

If the statewide wolf population at the end of previous calendar year is estimated to be < 15 breeding pairs

Consistent with the adaptive management framework of Montana's wolf management plan, more conservative levels of lethal control are to be implemented when the statewide wolf population is less than 15 breeding pairs (federal recovery definition). This would be out of concern for the population's overall status relative to relisting thresholds established by the federal government.

Before leaving the property or public grazing allotment where the depredation occurred as part of the initial response, WS has the option of setting traps at or near the depredation site in an effort to put a collar out without first contacting FWP. WS contacts FWP as soon as possible with the outcome of the investigation and whether or not traps were set. FWP must respond back as soon as possible.

FWP may still authorize implementation of lethal control as part of the follow up response, but it would do so conservatively. If traps are set, FWP may authorize lethal take of any or all wolves caught or request that a radio collar be placed in the group or a combination of both. Options can be discussed by FWP and WS ahead of time and prior to the initial investigation.

INITIAL RESPONSE -- PROBABLE: if depredation (injured or dead livestock) is determined by WS to be a “probable” wolf-related loss

As defined in Montana’s wolf plan, by WS and captured in MCA, a loss is determined as probable when the presence of some evidence suggests possible predation but there is a lack of sufficient evidence to clearly confirm predation by a particular species.

Neither the federal nor the state regulatory framework permits lethal control for probable wolf damage. WS has the option to set traps in an effort to put out a collar without first contacting FWP. WS contacts FWP as soon as possible with outcome of the investigation and whether or not traps were set. FWP must respond back as soon as possible. Options, including lethal control, can be discussed by FWP and WS ahead of time and prior to the initial investigation or after the investigation.