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**FROM:** Adrian Treves, [atreves@wisc.edu](mailto:atreves@wisc.edu), Founder and Director of the Carnivore Coexistence Lab at the Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison

**SUBJECT:** Review of the FWS Species Status Assessment (SSA) for gray wolves *Canis lupus* in the eastern USA under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA)

As a former official peer reviewer for FWS in 2019, I remain interested in how science is used to inform policy on endangered species, particularly wolf populations. Accordingly, I am sharing my unofficial peer review of the 2025 SSA for gray wolves in the eastern USA:

[https://ecos.fws.gov/docs/recovery\\_plan/20251103\\_SSA%20for%20the%20Gray%20Wolf%20in%20the%20Eastern%20United%20States\\_final\\_508.pdf](https://ecos.fws.gov/docs/recovery_plan/20251103_SSA%20for%20the%20Gray%20Wolf%20in%20the%20Eastern%20United%20States_final_508.pdf). My review is freely available at <https://faculty.nelson.wisc.edu/treves/CCC.php>.

### **Executive summary of the review by Adrian Treves, PhD**

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) 2025 SSA for eastern gray wolves presents a confident picture of secure gray wolves in Minnesota and perhaps other Western Great Lakes (WGL) states, along with little need or hope for wolf subpopulations establishing elsewhere east of the Mississippi for the foreseeable future. FWS confidence is misplaced because of unsupported suppositions, invalid assumptions, unscientific value judgments, and some flat out errors:

1. **Errors:** FWS errs in its definition of suitable habitat for wolves. FWS seems to believe suitable refers to whether wolf use suits humans. FWS errs in its estimates of maximum levels of lethal



control and maximum levels of human-caused mortality. FWS erroneously assumes density-dependent population dynamics despite scientific disagreements or even scientific consensus to the contrary. FWS errs in understanding patterns and causes of human tolerance, illegal killing of individual wolves, and sustainable human-caused mortality for wolf populations. For example, FWS equates owning livestock with intolerance for wolves. FWS ignores or dismisses reams of evidence indicating illegal wolf-killing is perpetrated by a small minority with extreme views; relatedly, the FWS ignores six studies showing FWS policy has increased rates of illegal killing. FWS erroneously treats the upper limit of sustainable human-caused mortality for wolf populations as 48% despite an FWS peer reviewer who showed arithmetically that value was too high and scientific consensus settling on 29% or lower. FWS erroneously treats human-caused mortality as consisting only of lethal control and 'harvest'. FWS assumes states count wolves accurately, precisely, reproducibly (hallmarks of good science), with sensitivity to changing conditions. FWS assumes this by ignoring several critiques of how WGL states count wolves and despite Minnesota estimating crudely every 5 years or more.

- 2. Flawed assumptions and unscientific value judgments:** FWS assumes states will follow their management plans strictly, which are not even guidance documents and therefore unenforceable, in the opinion of the Wisconsin Court of Appeals in 2026. Even if state management plans are enforceable, they are subject to swift regulatory changes or statutory over-rule. Therefore, FWS assumptions are unrealistic that lethal management policies will not change in the next five years let alone the 100 years they model. This optimism fails to recognize the reasonable worst case that sudden dramatic events will recur, such as that seen in Wisconsin when a second hunt was planned for Fall 2021 with a quota of 50-100% of the remaining population, after the unprecedented overkill of Feb 2021. That case exposed the inadequacy of Wisconsin's regulatory mechanisms. Nevertheless, FWS optimistically anticipates states will follow their management plans. Beyond Wisconsin, FWS



assumes states will voluntarily comply with FWS desires, rather than putting in place ESA-mandated post-delisting monitoring plans founded in science and effective interventions for emergency relisting. For regions beyond the current range of wolves in the WGL, the FWS appears to deny recolonization by wolves by dismissing most evidence, claiming without evidence that confirmed wolves are loners, and circumscribing the historical range of gray wolves based off flimsy evidence or a single, discredited study by FWS insiders. FWS erroneously claims it has not made normative or value-based judgments. It does so dozens of times in association with modeling wolf futures. FWS generally uses terminology with negative valence about wolves, such as “pack hunters” rather than cooperative hunting or teamwork, “livestock depredation” rather than predation on domestic animals. These are value judgments not scientific choices; yet they slant FWS science subtly. The slant surfaces in encouraging rather than discouraging high rates of wolf-killing (citing a study found to make arithmetic errors, failing to cite studies that correct arithmetic errors) and encouraging business as usual by WGL states even though the geographic expansion of their wolf populations stalled out approximately 20 years ago.

3. **Apparently unlawful neglect of the ESA:** Many of the missing peer-reviewed articles are published in better journals using stronger methods than the ones cited by FWS, Also many were provided to the FWS by colleagues or by me in public comments on this and prior regulatory proposals going back years including my official peer review in 2019, which makes it part of the administrative record by definition. Therefore, the FWS is not unaware of the work but rather dismissing it or ignoring it. Such conduct violates the “available” part of best available scientific and commercial data” (BAS). When FWS is confronted by a scientific debate or disagreement between scientists, it selects the result it prefers rather than the result supported by better methods or stronger inference. Similarly, it selects scientists whom it agrees with even when their work is rebutted for non-transparency,



irreproducible results, or errors. Such conduct violates the “best” part of best available scientific and commercial data” (BAS).

None of the above assumptions, decisions, or errors are cautious or conservative about the security or protection of wolves. Instead, the FWS consistently assumes (or errs) in favor of killing more wolves or in favor of delisting wolves more quickly. Such a policy stance is contrary to the spirit and language of the US Endangered Species Act, the country’s most popular environmental law.

I provide 136 citations to peer-reviewed scientific evidence and other scientific writings in support of remedying the above flaws.

I conclude the FWS has once again ignored or dismissed the best available science in favor of a predetermined policy outcome (delisting wolves nationwide). Until an unless FWS and other wildlife agencies recognize that BAS demands all science be sifted and winnowed for the best, regulatory changes and policies will remain unsound and flawed.

**See Appendix 1 for Specific commentary on SSA by chapter and section along with citations to scientific literature.**