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President & Chief Executive Officer

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The Honorable Ken Salazar
Secretary
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Secretary Salazar:

Defenders of Wildlife would again like to congratulate you as you begin your tenure as Secretary of the Interior. We look forward to working with you to address many of the conservation challenges facing us today. One important challenge left to you by your predecessor is resolution of the northern Rockies gray wolf issue. We want to work with you to correct the serious flaws in the Bush administration's eleventh hour attempt to promulgate a new rule removing portions of the Northern Rocky Mountain Distinct Population Segment ("DPS") of the gray wolf from the list of federal endangered species. Announced on January 14, 2009, the delisting rule was withdrawn from publication in accordance with the direction of President Obama's Chief of Staff, Rahm Emanuel, concerning review of rules issued by the previous administration.

Because the rule never took effect, the Obama administration has an important opportunity to move this issue forward by avoiding the mistakes of the past administration. We look forward to the time when gray wolves are recovered and delisted successfully, ensuring that they are sustainable in the wild and that state management plans are sufficient to maintain that recovery. We are committed to working with you to that end. Unfortunately, the Bush administration's rule was not based on sound science and does not satisfy the requirements of the Endangered Species Act. We therefore strongly believe it cannot move forward as is.

Although this letter focuses on the merits of the rule, we also note that the rulemaking process itself was procedurally deficient. After withdrawing its February 2008 delisting rule, and prior to announcing a final delisting rule, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service never fully described the parameters of the delisting proposal it was considering, thus denying the public the opportunity to provide fully informed comments. Accordingly, we strongly urge you not to finalize this current rule, which would only face further litigation and likely deepen the polarization surrounding wolves. Instead, we urge you to pursue a new course, one in which the issue of wolf delisting can be resolved openly, credibly, and in conformance with the Department's legal and scientific obligations.

The restoration of the gray wolf in the northern Rockies has been heralded nationally and internationally as one of the greatest wildlife conservation achievements of the last century. Gray wolves were nearly eradicated from the lower 48 states, but with the concerted effort of federal, tribal, state, and local stakeholders, the group of 66 animals reintroduced to central Idaho and Yellowstone has grown to approximately 1,500 wolves that now roam

Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming and are just beginning to recolonize Oregon and other neighboring states. The wolf population has made tremendous progress, but we are concerned that if wolves are removed from the federal endangered species list now, without adequate regulatory mechanisms in place across the region to ensure their long-term conservation, all of the considerable effort and investment by the American people, Congress, federal, state, and tribal agencies, as well as other stakeholders, in achieving this conservation success will be lost.

The Bush administration's wolf delisting rule would allow states in the northern Rockies to kill all but 300-450 wolves in the region, which current science has demonstrated would fall far below the minimum numbers needed to sustain a viable regional wolf metapopulation. The states are not obligated to sustain larger numbers than the delisting rule requires. We strongly believe that wolves should ultimately be delisted in the region, but under a scientifically sound delisting rule and state management plans that ensure the continued survival and conservation of wolves once they are removed from the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

Why aren't 300-450 wolves enough? When wolves were first re-introduced in the region, the 1987 recovery plan called for the establishment of at least 10 breeding pairs of wolves for three consecutive years in three separate but connected recovery areas, representing a minimum of approximately 300 wolves. Scientists estimated at the time that those numbers and that configuration would ensure an interconnected metapopulation in the northern Rockies, which was necessary before removing Endangered Species Act protection. As the wolf population grew, the Fish and Wildlife Service conducted an analysis to determine if the wolf population had achieved the goal of an interconnected metapopulation. Based on the Service's commissioned genetic analysis conducted up through 2004, when there were an estimated 834 wolves in the region, scientists determined that there was no evidence that the population had achieved genetic connectivity, the basis for the original metapopulation standard. Obviously this concerns us greatly.

The reality is that the 1987 recovery plan goals no longer represent the "best available science," as required by the Endangered Species Act for decision making. Contemporary scientific literature now strongly advises that minimum population viability for gray wolves requires a metapopulation of several thousand individuals, especially when the species is managed to sustain hunting and other mortality factors. One thing we know for certain: adequate connectivity for recovery simply cannot be achieved if the region's population is reduced to just 300-450 wolves, which would be allowable under the current delisting rule and state wolf management plans.

The northern Rockies states have an unfortunate history of taking extreme measures regarding wolves. Wyoming's wolf plan continues to classify wolves as predators in 90 percent of the state, a designation that allows them to be shot on sight. The official state policy of Idaho, as approved by its legislature and referenced in the state's wolf management plan, is the removal of all wolves within its borders. In addition, aggressive wolf control under state management in northwestern Montana has significantly reduced wolves in that subpopulation and impaired the connectivity of the northern Rockies population with the Canadian wolf population. Additionally, all three states have adopted liberal defense of property laws that could lead to widespread wolf killing. While we are not opposed to

wolves being treated similarly to other “predator” wildlife species under state management, we are very concerned that decisions will be made under the existing state wolf management plans that could rapidly depress wolf numbers below sustainable levels.

We want to work with you to assure long-term recovery of wolves in the northern Rockies. The ultimate goal of wolf recovery must be the achievement of a viable wolf population in the northern Rockies that can be managed in perpetuity by the states. Unfortunately, the Bush administration’s repeated attempts to delist wolves in the absence of a sound scientific basis and legally-defensible state management plans have only served to heighten controversy and polarization over wolf recovery.

Although there is no exact blueprint or manual that describes what viable wolf recovery would look like, successful, long-term recovery can be achieved by following a process of incorporating credible science, ensuring that state management plans are adequate to prevent backsliding of wolf populations once federal protections are removed, and following a robust and transparent regulatory process to allow for full public input.

We propose three steps:

- First, convene a panel of respected, neutral scientists to analyze the best available science on wolf biology, population management and genetics in order to establish scientific criteria for what constitutes long-term wolf recovery in the northern Rockies. This will address a key basis for criticism of the Bush administration’s delisting proposals – that they were not based on a contemporary scientific understanding of wolf population dynamics and ecosystem effects.
- Second, convene a citizens advisory committee, or stakeholder group, comprised of key interests in the region such as ranchers, state and federal agencies, scientists, wildlife conservationists, hunters, educators, media, rural residents, tribal representatives, religious community leaders, decision makers and interested members of the public. This group could be charged with determining how to achieve the technical team’s science-based recovery goals and collaboratively recommending methods for improving state wolf management plans and managing on-the-ground conflicts.
- Third, work with the states to ensure adequate regulatory mechanisms are in place post delisting. State management plans should not seek to suppress wolf populations to the bare minimum necessary to avoid relisting as threatened or endangered, but rather allow wolf populations to function as part of the natural ecosystem, with nonlethal measures being given priority as a primary management tool to minimize conflict with livestock producers and others. The science based recovery goals and stakeholder recommendations for managing on the ground conflicts should provide useful guidance for these state wolf management plans.


Once the science is solid, adequate state management plans are in place, and stakeholders have provided appropriate input, the Fish and Wildlife Service should propose delisting through an open and transparent rule-making process to allow maximum public participation and visibility of the process. The stakeholders group can help with outreach and public relations to help reduce tension and increase acceptance of the final delisting

package.

We applaud you for your commitment to restoring the Department of the Interior's commitment to science, transparency, and ethical decision making. Recovery of the northern Rockies gray wolf provides a great opportunity to demonstrate how it works. We stand ready to work with you and the states to develop and support a scientifically and legally defensible wolf delisting plan that guarantees the long-term conservation of the northern Rockies gray wolf. And we wish you many conservation successes in your tenure as Secretary.

If you would like to discuss this further, or would like further information, we would be happy to meet with you at your convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Roger W. Stein". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "R" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.