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Wolf plan comment begins Monday

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Public comment on the draft Wyoming wolf management plan begins at 7 a.m. Monday, when the document is posted on the Wyoming Game and Fish Department's Web site.

A 30-day public comment period starts at that moment, during which time written comments can be sent to the department -- either via the U.S. Postal Service or a new electronic messaging system available via the department's Web site, <http://gf.state.wy.us/>. E-mails will no longer be accepted as a means of public comment.

Also during that 30-day period, there will be public information meetings about the wolf plan in Cody, Pinedale, Casper and Lander. Oral public comments will not be collected at those meetings, so written comment will still be required.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Commission approved taking the wolf management plan public at a Friday meeting in Casper, and also approved the new public comment procedure.

According to Larry Kruckenberg, special assistant for policy and development, visitors to the Game and Fish Web site will have access to a variety of supporting documents to the draft wolf management plan, as well as an electronic comment system, requiring that visitors log in and provide their names and addresses.

"This way, we won't have to hand you (the commission members) a 47-pound pile of paper to read," Kruckenberg said. Instead, all the public comment will be readily accessible on computer disks.

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In addition to the draft wolf management plan, the Web site will post a map showing where wolves will be regarded as big game trophy animals, and where they will be regarded as predators who can be shot on sight. Gov. Dave Freudenthal's letter to the commission, dated Sept. 4, will also be posted -- formally asking the commission to adopt the boundary required by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Game and Fish Director Terry Cleveland explained that very little of the wolf management plan has changed in recent months, save cost and budget estimates of what it will take to reduce the Wyoming wolf population to desired levels.

At a minimum, Cleveland said, the Fish and Wildlife Service believes each of the three states -- Wyoming, Montana and Idaho -- should maintain 10 breeding pairs of wolves and 100 wolves total once the animals are removed from Endangered Species Act protection. But because the federal agency wants a margin of comfort, Wyoming will have 15 breeding pairs and 150 wolves total, including those in the national parks, with seven breeding pairs outside the parks.

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Moving pieces

Cleveland noted that there are still several moving pieces, other than the strong possibility that environmental groups might file a lawsuit to stop the delisting process on wolves or the Wyoming management plan.

For one, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intends to publish a new rule by mid-December to allow states to start controlling wolf populations as a means to protect wild ungulate herds from undue levels of predation. Such a rule could become effective mid-January 2008, Cleveland said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service also plans to publish a final delisting decision by mid-January.

Cleveland told the commissioners that he will report back to the commission on the public comment when the commission meets Nov. 16, and can vote on a provisional, final plan. Cleveland said the department needs to start work now on new rules and regulations governing wolf management programs, which can be implemented next year.

In public comment about whether the commission should release the plan for public comment, the commission heard from Jim Magagna, executive vice president of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. He expressed concern about endorsing the plan

without knowing the ultimate outcome of rule-making.

"It's called leap of faith," said Bill Williams, chairman of the commission.

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