

Committee recommends increases to otter quota

By Jim Servi

Contributing Writer

Wausau, Wis. — The DNR Furbearer Committee, led by John Olson, DNR furbearer ecologist, is recommending a harvest quota of 1,300 otters for the 2014-15 season, a number that's up by 100 from last year.

Forty percent of those will be allocated to the Northern Zone,

with the remaining 60 percent split between the Central and Southern zones. This recommendation is up from 1,200 last year, which the DNR's Wildlife Policy Team approved, and up from the 2012-13 recommendation of 1,050, which the DNR Wildlife Policy Team ultimately lowered to 900.

No tribal declaration is expected above the authorized 15 percent.

Last year, 579 otters were harvested (43 of those reported by tribal trappers) which was down sharply from the previous year's harvest of 1,044. In addition, 238 otters were turned in as incidental catches, raising the total mortality to 817 otters for last year. This is down from 1,445 in 2012-13 and 1,487 in 2011-12.

Of the incidental catches, 18 occurred on Indian reservations, and 79 were caught as part of the USDA Wildlife Services beaver-control program. When these figures are added to population models, Robert Rolley, the DNR's wildlife population ecologist, estimates a statewide population at 10,666 otters. This is lower than the population goal of 13,000 otters, although their population has shown steady growth since 2007.

The otter quotas were split even-

ly between zones last season, but there will be a 40-30-30 zone split between Northern, Central, and Southern, respectively. The split is based on several methods. Each year, 23 aerial surveys are authorized in each zone with an indicator that the population in the Southern Zone is stable and that there has been a large decline in the Northern and Central zones since 2000.

On the other hand, beaver traps have reported an increase in otters in the Northern Zone. Up until last year, success rates also had increased steadily since 2007. Conflicting trends and opinions make it difficult to set the state split between zones, but the committee has decided to move back to the 40-30-30 split and to work to increase the otter quota as long as the population continues to grow.