

Wolf committee ends year with long 'to do' list

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Wausau, Wis. — Wolf depredation, depredation payments, research, tweaks to the wolf season, and public acceptance of wolves were topics that continued to get the attention of the DNR's Wolf Advisory Committee that met Dec. 11 in Wausau.

Bill Vander Zouwen, DNR Wildlife Ecology Section chief, led the meeting of 21 individuals representing a variety of groups that all have a stake in a wolf management plan the DNR is in the process of revising and updating.

It appears the hunting and trapping regulations that have been in place for the 2012 and 2013 seasons will remain the same during the 2014 season. The WAC's goal, though, is to update the wolf plan in time to implement any rule changes for the 2015 season.

This group was created for the purpose of providing wolf management ideas to the Natural Resources Board. The NRB ultimately will give its final approval to the revised wolf plan. Any changes will be reviewed by lawmakers.

The proposed wolf plan was distributed, and the group took the time to go through the document line by line to ensure that it is updated and accurate. The group attempted to eliminate all ambiguous wording. One of the first items discussed was what the new depredation plan would look like now that a wolf harvest season has occurred for the past two years.

application and license fees collected for the wolf season. From there, depredation losses will be paid first, and any other money leftover will be used for other technical assistance. Apparently, this fund was bolstered by a \$50,000 USFWS grant, and the group is looking for other funding sources.

Now that wolves no longer are federally listed as an endangered species, the DNR is responsible for issuing damage permits when it determines there is a need. There are two primary methods to accomplish this. The first method is that a landowner can eliminate a species year-round on his or her property, similar to coyotes and raccoons. The second method is that a person will have to get a permit that is issued based on damage similar to bear and deer damage. The group will discuss where wolves fit in this spectrum during future meetings. The group emphasized that if a landowner catches a wolf in the act of damaging his property, he may legally shoot it.

The committee also was quick to point out that members don't operate in a vacuum after reading a list of events that may cause the USFWS to take a closer look at

how Wisconsin is managing its wolf population. One particular item of note was the following wording: "Any wolf population decline in Wisconsin zones 1 and 2 or the Upper Peninsula of Michigan of three years or more in duration." This and other language from the USFWS play a role in the state's wolf plan as the DNR attempts to avoid re-listing and federal oversight.

Dave McFarland, DNR large carnivore specialist, a committee member, stated that the first two wolves were harvested with the use of hounds (that number increased to five as of Dec. 17), which has fueled conversations and has left his office busy responding to dozens of calls.

Trapping education also was discussed as the group looks for ways to reduce conflicts. There were four incidents caused by wolf traps this year in which dogs were caught. No permanent or fatal injuries occurred, but one dog owner was bitten when she tried to remove a trap from her dog. The Wisconsin Trappers Association wants a wolf trapping education class to be mandatory for all wolf trappers. That question is expected to be part of the spring hearings. It also recom-

mends pushing the application date for wolf tags back to December to allow more time to hold these classes.

The second half of the meeting was a brain-storming session, starting with what the group wants the 2015 wolf plan to look like as it attempts to create a mission statement. Although not finalized, the mission statement in progress read as follows: *The Wisconsin DNR will maintain a healthy and sustainable wolf population providing ecological, cultural, and recreational benefits while recognizing the diverse perspective of our citizens and minimizing/addressing conflicts.*

The group also talked about where wolves should be encouraged to exist and where they should be discouraged. Some specific areas were mentioned, but the ideas all seemed to point to the general theme that wolves should exist where they have suitable habitat and a low conflict potential with humans. The zones also have to be large enough to allow for practical management. Someone noted that the current zones were an excellent tool and took most of these criteria into account while they were being developed.

Tom Daigle joined the group near the end of the meeting with his account of how wolves have affected his life in eastern Lincoln County.

Daigle's family started seeing wolves on a regular basis in 1998 and have had 11 wolves within 100 yards of their house and family farm. Tom said they lost two horses to wolves, that wolves had multiple encounters with their dogs, and they fear for the safety of their children and grandchildren. He is happy that they now have the right to protect themselves, their dogs, and their property.

The group closed with a retrospective look at what they are trying to accomplish with the wolf management plan as they prepare for more work in 2014: reduce the level of conflict, balance funding from permit levels with damage costs, prevent federal re-listing, create a sustainable wolf population, provide a wolf harvest for sportsmen, identify research needs, increase public tolerance in wolf areas, and reduce anxiety among the public. Those were just a few of the many items the group will debate when they return to Wausau on Jan. 21.

Eric Koens, head of the Wisconsin Cattlemen's Association, addressed the group and presented research conducted by the USDA in 2008, showing the indirect impacts of disease that wolves could carry into livestock herds.

"This was not previously addressed in the damage plan, although it can cause just as much, if not more, harm to farms," said Koens, who also suggested that this may have the same effect on deer.

One of the main potential indirect losses to cattle mentioned in the study is neospora caninum. Wolves, and other wild canines, are a host and can infect cattle when they occupy the same area. It then becomes a major cause of abortions in cattle. Burnett County veterinarian Dr. Greg Palmquist confirmed the same concept when he presented to the group in November. He represented the TNT ranch and stated that 30 percent of that herd has the disease in question.

The difficult notion is to determine the link to wolves, since coyotes also are a carrier of neospora caninum. Koens wrapped it up by saying, "That is exactly the point; I have a right to control coyotes on my farm but not wolves."

One note the group acknowledged is that the depredation list is just the "tip of the iceberg" on depredation data, since it is only information that is reported — and then only the losses that can be verified. They also came to the conclusion that some level of conflict and loss will probably always exist, just as it does with squirrels, deer, and bears, but the goal of the plan should be to minimize conflict and have procedures in place when it does occur.

There was a lot of discussion around where the money will come from to pay for technical assistance, non-lethal abatements, and damages caused by wolves. Right now, it appears that by