

Wolf Population

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its wolf plan. Riggle called the Conservation Congress committee meeting simply to inform members about the progress of the DNR's Wolf Advisory Committee on the new plan, but the overarching theme kept coming back to that magic number and what to do about it.

The general consensus of members is that the state should move away from the goal of 350 because it has become such a focal point and the source of confusion. The problem is that there has never been an accurate population estimate, and the number that is always referenced by the DNR is actually a winter "minimum count." Confusion often arises when DNR employees and the general media use the term population estimate instead minimum count when talking wolf numbers.

Last winter, that minimum winter count was 809 to 834 wolves. That means the DNR is confident there are at least 809 wolves in the state, but also understands that there could be more wolves. However, the general public sees that number as a population estimate, so if the DNR were to set a quota of 275

wolves, it would appear that almost a third of the wolves would be harvested.

Hence, the confusion and one of many reasons it is difficult to get public support from all stakeholders involved, Riggle said.

Most other states, including Minnesota, Michigan, and Wyoming, do not have a specific wolf population in their management plan, but rather a series of objectives and thresholds. A wolf population goal seems to be unique to Wisconsin, and most Conservation Congress members would like to eliminate it from the state's plan.

In place of a population goal, several ideas surfaced Jan. 7. First off, most congress committee members agreed there needs to be a "numbered" threshold set first. That might be 350 wolves, or it may be a different number that makes sense, but that number would not be a population goal.

Committee members said they'd like to have a large enough population to continue a wolf season, but also have enough flexibility so the state can manage problem animals and reduce wolf kills of livestock, dogs, and other pets. Even though Melissa Smith, a new Dane County congress del-

egate, disagreed with the need for a wolf season, she agreed that there was a "need to reduce depredation."

This sparked discussion about a "directed hunt," such as Michigan's hunt that took place in limited areas with livestock losses, versus a general hunt. According to Dave McFarland, DNR large carnivore ecologist, Michigan opened only about 6 percent of the Upper Peninsula land area during its first wolf season. He also said that to control problem wolves an immediate and direct solution is the best method. In order to do that as part of a general hunt, zones would have to be smaller and would need to shift every year, requiring much micromanagement.

Committee member Scott McAuley proposed allowing private certified trappers to manage problem wolves in place of government officials. That, or allow wolf tag holders to fill their tag outside the season if a problem wolf is identified. Having a directed hunt only did not garner

a lot of support, but all options were on the table for discussion at this point.

No matter what decision is made, the winter wolf count is not going away. As part of the delisting process, a count is required annually for the first five years to ensure that a state's wolf plan is within federal guidelines. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requires that there is a combined population of 100 wolves between Wisconsin (at least 80 in Wisconsin) and Michigan, and that Minnesota have at least 1,500 wolves. A drop of more than 25 percent in the population will trigger an additional review. Even after that point, the count will provide information to assist with wolf management.

Most of the items discussed during the meeting were just that – a discussion. It takes legislation to change many aspects of the wolf season, including harvest methods, start/end dates, licensing framework, and hound season dates. All other changes require Natural Resources Board approval.

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Thresholds

If the DNR considers thresholds or indices, what might they be?

"We do know what we pay out each year in damage payments. We know how many cattle died. We know how many dogs died. Why not use those as indices?" Riggle asked. "Instead of losing 26 hounds, let's try to cut that in half. Instead of having 50 farms with wolf problems, how about lowering that to 10 farms?"

"I don't think it would be hard to try managing to those numbers. We would still do the minimum count, but instead of arguing over a population goal, let's use it as a threshold so we don't get relisted and then manage to other indices," he said. "... We have to get some sort of a system set up that everyone can live with, and I think this idea, that if we can control verified human conflict, then trying to put a number on the wolf population becomes a moot point."

WON Editor Dean Bortz contributed to this report.

A wolf 'threshold' instead of goal?

By Jim Servi
Contributing Writer

Madison — Whether the DNR moves away from population goals and toward "thresholds" as a means of managing the wolf population remains to be seen, but talks took off in that direction outside of the agency during a Jan. 7 teleconference meeting of the Conservation Congress Wolf Study Committee.

Mike Riggle broached the topic of identifying wolf population thresholds, or indices, that could be used – instead of goals – to determine if there are too many, or too few, wolves in the state. Riggle is a veterinarian from Medford and a longtime Conservation Congress delegate from Taylor County. He's also chairman of the congress' wolf committee and sits on the DNR's wolf committee.

Riggle suggested the number of annual livestock losses and pet losses could be used to gauge wolf numbers.

There was a lot of speculation leading up to the Jan. 7 teleconference that the "magic number" of 350 wolves – the state's current wolf population goal – would be questioned as the DNR updates

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