DNR working on its beaver plan

By Jim Servi
Contributing Writer

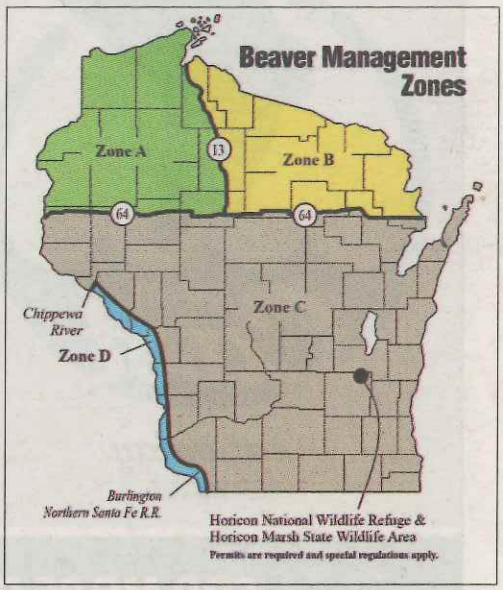
Madison — Even as longtime DNR furbearer ecologist John Olson nears retirement, he and others within the agency have started implementing the updated beaver-management plan that calls for slightly increasing beaver numbers in two northern Wisconsin zones.

The new plan also calls for the DNR to identify areas, usually trout streams, where beaver presence should be discouraged by converting aspen areas to conifers or northern hardwoods. Conversely, in areas where beaver can cause little damage to infrastructure or trout, aspen regeneration will be encouraged through timber cutting, according to the plan.

The Natural Resources Board approved the new beaver plan in October after four years of meetings, webinars, surveys, and work by the DNR's beaver task force that was composed of 44 people from 24 agencies, bureaus, groups, and tribes.

The 70-page document replaces the 25-year-old plan that was approved in 1990. The new plan highlights six areas – population management, research, habitat management, damage control, education, and beaver health.

In respect to population management, the report recommends to maintain or slightly increase beaver numbers in the two zones north of Hwy. 64, to maintain the population south of Hwy. 64, and to decrease the population in Zone D along the Mississippi River.



Olson said the DNR uses trends, science, trapping reports, damage reports, and an aerial survey to get a good indication of the

(See **Beaver Plan** Page 24)

Beaver Plan

(From Page 1)

beaver population. From there, task force members decided it was wise to make the goals subjective, rather than numeric, based on what is happening on the landscape.

Focusing first on the population north of Hwy. 64, Olson said there was "a very large beaver population in the 1980s, which was causing damage to infrastructure and property due to good habitat, low fur prices, and limited accessibility in some areas."

Because of those numbers, the 1990 beaver plan focused on "reduce, reduce, reduce" and led to expanded seasons, eliminating permitting hurdles, getting new trappers involved, and even offering financial incentives for beaver harvests. All of these practices brought the population back into balance; some trappers would even say the population was too low.

Olson said that creating balance in the population is important because beavers "are a keystone species that is able to change the habitat ,which is negative to some species and positive to others."

In Zone C, south of Hwy. 64, Olson said the population bounces around and, with limited survey information, the task force recommended maintaining the population in that zone.

In Zone D, the Mississippi River corridor, it appears that beaver numbers have grown based on damage reports regarding dams, dikes, and migratory bird nesting islands, Olson said.

Based on that, the task force looked at decreasing the population, but struggled with how to accomplish the reduction.

"There is probably no way to expand the season, which means we must work with the current structure," Olson said.

Although the exact solution hasn't been determined yet, brainstorming has centered on eliminating barriers for trappers. Currently, trappers in this zone are limited to 40 traps, based on the number of tags issued, and they aren't allowed to use some popular trapping methods such as underwater snares.

"I'm not sure what the final recommendation will be, but we're working with the people over there to find a better way to manage that population, because regulated harvest is by far the most effective management tool for beaver," Olson said.

Future research efforts will be focused on what beavers do to a landscape, positive and negative, to help make management decisions in the future.

Research was the next major focus of the new beaver plan.

"Older research done in northeastern Wisconsin indicates negative impacts of beaver on cold-water fish species, mainly trout, but we need to look at it from a larger perspective – flood control, water retention, habitat for other species, renewable resources for humans, possible destruction of old-growth forest, and different pathogens in beaver ponds versus free-flowing streams, for example," Olson said, while acknowledging that beaver research has been limited to this point.

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Habitat management is an important section in every management plan, but often gets limited attention and funding to make it a priority, according to Olson. The beaver plan focuses on the shoreland zones and forest management in those zones. Olson said the task force had an interesting conversation with state foresters on promoting or discouraging beaver habitat in certain areas.

One example: Foresters can plant conifers in "cold-water-protection areas" to make the habitat less appealing to beavers. Or, they could promote beaver habitat in warm-water areas by encouraging aspen and willow growth.

"Damage control drew more people to the table than any other topic," Olson said.

Many people were fearful the DNR would restrict the damage-control program in the state, but the task force was quick to recognize that beavers can cause serious damage to the landscape and didn't want to restrict people or agencies from limiting damage.

Based on comments from the public and task force members, there exists more than a little angst over how USDA Wildlife Services trappers operate. Some trappers say the federal crew removes the "easy" animals before or after pelts are prime, along with too many incidental otters.

"There appears to be some distrust in how the program works, and we failed to communicate things better in the past few years," Olson said.

"They're (Wildlife Services) only here to provide services to land managers, and they have contracts with the fisheries bureau to keep the most critical stretches of trout streams and rivers free flowing."

Olson said Wildlife Services accounts for just 2 to 4 percent of the state beaver harvest each year.

"Their goal isn't to kill beaver, but rather to respond to and limit damage caused by beavers," he said.

Education and beaver health rounded out the major sections of the beaver plan.

"We plan to communicate better with people about what's going on out there, educate (the public) on the uniqueness of beaver and some of the challenges while also working more with external partners to reach out to people," he said.

One idea that they plan to capitalize on in coming years is working with science and agriculture teachers to provide trapper education classes for high school credit.

Even though the plan is approved, there will still be an annual summary and a 5-year review. The summary will include trapper surveys, agency surveys, health monitoring, outreach efforts, avoidance studies, fur buyer surveys, and population surveys.

The first 5-year review will activate the task force in 2020 to review the status of the plan, Olson said.

"Our goal of this whole effort is hoping to show a reasonable balance," he said. "We're really tickled that we brought so many people together from diverse backgrounds. Although we were polarized at first, we came together with thoughtful ideas and a plan that was approved the first time around."