

Wolf goal population options range from 300 to 650 animals

By Jim Servi

Contributing Writer

Wausau, Wis. — Timber wolf population goals seem to be the leading topic heading into the DNR's rewrite of its wolf plan, and that remained unchanged Sept. 10 as the DNR's wolf committee meeting ended with four options for a new wolf goal, options ranging from the current goal of 350 to 800. Initial goal offerings totaled 13.

The committee eventually will whittle those four options to one, then take that alternative to the Natural Resources Board, most likely in February.

During the Sept. 10 meeting population goal ideas came from every corner of the table. Several of the options were directly related to the results of the DNR's "wolf attitude" survey that were released earlier in September. Population goal options going forward include:

- 350 wolves, plus or minus 10 percent;
- 650 wolves, plus or minus 10 percent;
- Range of 300 to 650 wolves;
- Threshold of 350 wolves.

In a meeting at which the wolf committee was called dysfunctional

and a member of the audience, none of the final four options received unanimous support. Early on in the meeting, Mike Riggie, a Conservation Congress representative, said the group's responsibility was to give the public options. Many options were presented, but most of them weren't welcomed from one side or the other. Options were discussed in terms of social carrying capacity and the effects the wolf population would have on other things, such as livestock, dogs and deer.

Avoiding federal delisting and state relisting was a major point of concern for the committee.

The first option, a population goal of 350 wolves, is based on the current wolf plan objective. Mike Brust, of Wausau, is the Wisconsin Bowhunters Association president. Brust and several others proposed having a goal of less than 350 wolves. Brust said there should be an unlimited wolf quota in Zone 6.

"No one wants wolves to be relisted, but let's be clear about what that number is," Brust said. "It's not true that if we go below 350 that we'll be relisted."

Neither of those suggestions

will make it to public hearing. State relisting will occur if the minimum wolf count drops below 250 animals. That would limit the response of federal agents from USDA Wildlife Services to live-stock losses.

The next option, a goal of 650 wolves, came from a Timber Wolf Alliance recommendation based partly on the DNR's recent wolf attitude survey results. With the survey showing seemingly favorable public attitudes at the current population level, and an over-winter minimum count put at 658 to 687 wolves this past winter, the proposal elects to keep the population at current levels.

The Timber Wolf Alliance and other protectionist groups also proposed a recommendation of 800 wolves, close to the over-winter minimum count at the time of federal delisting, but that option received little support from the committee.

Dan Michels, a DNR conservation warden based in Park Falls, had this to say about the proposal. "Law enforcement is generally the initial contact for the DNR, and I'm still getting weekly, sometimes daily, calls from people with negative interaction with wolves ... 650 is too high and 350 is too low," he said.

A threshold of 350 wolves is the fourth option, although many were concerned with the threshold concept.

Brust said, "A threshold is unac-

ceptable. People want a number."

Dave McFarland, DNR large carnivore specialist based in Rhinelander, also had concerns with the threshold concept.

"If we have a threshold, then there would be no target, making it difficult for management purposes," he said.

Essentially, this option gives maximum flexibility to manage wolves above the threshold level while maintaining at least 350 wolves as a minimum viable population. Specific guidance on the threshold concept will be included during public hearings if this option is cleared for public consideration.

Adrian Wydeven, a DNR wildlife biologist in Park Falls who used to run the wolf program, was asked about the science behind the numbers. He said that "300 to 500 is a sustainable population for wolves."

At some point in October, MacFarland will release a draft wolf plan to the public for review. Then a public comment period will open in late October and continue into November. The DNR will collect that input, come up with several options, release those for public review, then tour the state for a series of public meetings before taking a final recommendation to the NRB in February.