

Montana wolf management

This past summer our department leadership held public meetings across Montana to hear what people have to say about FWP and the fish, wildlife, state parks, and outdoor recreation we manage and conserve.

People asked us about hunting access, elk shoulder seasons, wall-eye catch rates, grizzly bears, mountain lions—you name it. Some of the most passionate comments and discussions concerned wolves.

One sentiment I heard at the meetings was that the new harvest regulations recently approved by the Fish and Wildlife Commission will result in the “slaughter” or even “extinction” of wolves in Montana. That won’t happen.

The commission voted to increase wolf harvest by allowing snaring statewide and night hunting on private land. These are new policies in Montana’s wolf manage-

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ment scheme. They were deemed necessary by the trustees of Montana’s public trust to increase wolf harvest and reduce the population of these large carnivores to a sustainable level, as provided in statute.

After 66 wolves were introduced to Yellowstone National Park by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in 1995-96, the wolf population in Montana began growing exponentially. By 2001 it reached the first federal recovery goal of 100 wolves. The next year it exceeded a revised federal “buffer” goal of 150 wolves. Today the population is roughly 1,200—greatly exceeding the federal target.

Even though our five regional wolf management specialists help reduce wolf conflicts on livestock operations, such as by installing electric fencing and fladry (flagging) deterrents, most legislators and fish and wildlife commissioners believe the population is too high and that previously approved methods have proved inadequate to manage populations.

Some people don’t like the idea of trappers using snares on wolves—or any type of trap. But Montana law allows snaring and trapping of many different animals, including coyotes and furbearers.

Wolves are thriving in Montana. Since 2011, when the species was removed from federal protection and the state began allowing

hunting and trapping, the population has stabilized. In recent years hunters and trappers, along with federal agents responding to livestock depredation, have taken roughly 350 animals annually while the population has remained steady. Wolves are prolific, have few natural enemies, and are extremely difficult to hunt or trap. In addition, policy safeguards are in place to ensure the population remains at sustainable levels.

If the new harvest methods result in a harvest topping 450 wolves, the Fish and Wildlife Commission will immediately engage



in a review with the potential for rapid in-season adjustments. Hunters and trappers must report taking a wolf within 24 hours of harvest, so we can track what is happening in nearly real time. FWP, for its part, will provide commissioners with data and recommendations for possible season revisions to ensure the viability of the wolf population. Thus, as these latest harvest policies are carried out, provisions have been established to protect wolf populations.

I’m glad Montanans shared their views about wolves and other topics at our regional meetings this past summer. I continue to invite comments and questions about this agency and its role in managing the state’s fish, wildlife, state parks, and other outdoor recreation. As has been the case throughout FWP’s 121-year history, some people may not agree with all the actions our agency is directed to take. But I want everyone to understand why we do what we do.

—**Hank Warsech**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks