

October 29th, 2020

Wisconsin's Green Fire: Statement on Wolf Delisting and Recovery

Gray wolves in the Western Great Lakes have been listed as an Endangered Species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) since a 2014 relisting, following a federal court order. The USFWS has signaled their intention to delist gray wolves from the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Species, which will mark the beginning of the next chapter of our long relationship with wolves in the Great Lakes region.

In light of these actions, Wisconsin's Green Fire urges the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) to immediately resume work on developing a new state wolf conservation plan using the best science and public attitude data available on wolves.

In proceeding with an updated wolf conservation plan for Wisconsin, we strongly recommend that WDNR reestablish a two-faceted advisory committee structure, described in this statement. This will allow for an inclusive and transparent wolf governance process that reflects public perceptions and incorporates the latest social and ecological science on wolves in Wisconsin. After being essentially eliminated approximately 60 years ago, gray wolves in Wisconsin have recovered with state, federal, and tribal protections to reach populations that are beginning to stabilize and appear to be reaching biological carrying capacity.

Despite the challenges that exist between wolves and livestock owners, hunters, and residents in wolf country, overall public attitudes towards wolves lean positive.

The WDNR conducted a wolf attitude survey in 2014, the most extensive public attitude survey ever done by a state agency relating to Wisconsin wolves. The Wisconsin-specific study included people living both inside and outside of wolf country and found that attitudes towards wolves were more favorable than unfavorable – by a small margin within wolf range and by a larger margin outside of wolf range.¹

Wolves help maintain healthy forests and landscape biodiversity.

Although wolves have a relatively minor impact on deer populations, they significantly alter the habitats of deer and other prey species by reducing their tendency to concentrate in favorable areas and increasing their seasonal movements. This effect is generally associated with increases in forest habitat and biodiversity across the landscape and with reduction in the well-documented impacts of deer browsing on forest regeneration and vegetation.^{2, 3, 4, 5}

Wolves are culturally significant to Wisconsin's diverse American Indian Nations and their rights and interests need to be recognized and respected.

Wolves are also considered culturally significant to Wisconsin's diverse American Indian Nations. Wisconsin is home to 11 federally recognized tribes with legal rights to natural resources. For the Anishinaabe which includes the Ojibwe and Potawatomi peoples, wolf or Ma'iingan, is the brother to the original man. The Anishinaabe believe that the well-being of wolves and man are intricately linked to a healthy wolf population and crucial to their people's survival.⁶

The Ojibwe of the Great Lakes have off-reservation treaty-reserved rights to utilize natural resources in the ceded territories that encompass much of the northern 1/3 of the state, where most wolves are found. Although they could legally claim half of the allowable harvest of wolves from the ceded territory, the Ojibwe oppose the hunting and trapping of wolves and want to ensure the protection of wolf packs that roam between their reservation lands, ceded territories and off-reservation, so that they yield the ecological and cultural benefits that healthy Ma'iingan populations provide.

As wolves have reached healthy population levels in Wisconsin, we support the resumption of state and tribal management of wolves in the state. However, current statutory mandates and the outdated 1999 wolf management plan hinder the effective conservation of our wolf population today.

The 1999 Wisconsin Wolf Management Plan does not reflect the current conservation status of wolves in our region, current population trends, or the latest ecological and social science in wolf conservation. In order to manage wolves effectively, Wisconsin needs an updated wolf conservation plan based on current science and population data and that is informed by robust and balanced public and scientific input. WDNR science staff perform excellent work on wolf biology, however the composition of the current Wisconsin Wolf Advisory Committee does not reflect outside scientific perspectives, or the legitimate viewpoints of groups opposed to wolf hunting.

Wisconsin needs statutory authority for a wolf program that is consistent with our state's conservation tradition and that reflects established wildlife governance principles.

Instead of authorizing the WDNR to hold a hunting season, as occurs with virtually all other game species, 2012 Wisconsin Act 169 mandated WDNR to hold a wolf hunting and trapping season that runs from early November to late February at any time wolves are not listed under the Endangered Species Act. Under Act 169, WDNR has authority to establish the configuration of the management zones, as well as the harvest quota for each zone, and if quotas are reached, WDNR can close the season within 24 hours. But the WDNR and public are limited in their ability to determine areas open to harvest, methods of take, and other important aspects of harvest to assure sound conservation of wolves.

Revision of the current statutory authority for wolves should restore to WDNR its proper role of determining the appropriate management framework for hunting and other aspects of a wolf program, developed with input from citizens and stakeholders and scientific experts, and in consultation with tribal governments.

Wisconsin's Green Fire urges the WDNR to promptly begin developing a new state wolf conservation plan using the best science and public attitude data available.

In proceeding with an updated wolf conservation plan, we strongly recommend that the WDNR re-establish a two-faceted advisory committee structure, comprised of **a science and technical advisory committee** with expertise in wolf biology and science, and a **diverse stakeholder advisory committee** broadly representative of the people and organizations interested in wolves.

Two advisory committees will guide WDNR through the development of a wolf plan grounded in the best available science and conservation practices with recommendations from scientists, natural resource specialists, tribes, sportspeople, and a broad spectrum of public opinion.

An updated wolf conservation plan will provide guidance to inform legislation needed to soundly manage wolves, including necessary revisions to Act 169. Wisconsin citizens need to be able to voice their opinion on wolf issues, without having to seek legal recourse to make their voices heard.

Wisconsin's Green Fire recommends these immediate actions to address new state responsibilities for managing wolves across the state.

Under renewed state management, efforts to minimize wolf livestock conflicts will require a broadly integrated approach that includes consistent and pro-active use of non-lethal controls that can be tailored to adjust to the variation in types of depredations, locations, pack histories, landscapes, and affected landowners, and lethal controls where needed.

Under any scenario where hunting and trapping wolves is restored, the WDNR should proceed conservatively by maintaining the population within 2016-20 levels (midwinter counts between 866-1034 wolves) until a new wolf conservation plan that reflects best available science and current public opinion is developed and approved by the Natural Resources Board.

For more information please contact Adrian Wydeven, WGF's Wildlife Work Group Chair, at adrianwydeven@cheqnet.net or Sarah Wilkins, WGF's Science Director at swilkins@wgreenfire.org.

Citations

- ¹ Holsman, R., N. Kaner, and J. Petchenik. 2014. Public attitudes towards wolves and wolf management in Wisconsin. Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, unpublished report, Madison, Wisconsin, U.S.A., <https://dnr.wi.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/wolf/documents/WolfAttitudeSurveyReportDRAFT.pdf>
- ² Bouchard, K., J.E. Wiedenhoef, A.P. Wydeven, and T.P. Rooney. 2013. Wolves facilitate the recovery of browse-sensitive understory herbs in Wisconsin forests. *Boreal Environmental Research* 18 (suppl. A): 43-49.
- ³ Callan, R., N.P. Nibbelink, T.P. Rooney, J.E. Wiedenhoef, and A.P. Wydeven. 2013. Recolonizing wolves trigger a trophic cascade. *Journal of Ecology* 101: 837-845.
- ⁴ Levi, T. and C. C. Wilmers. Wolves-coyotes-foxes: a cascade among carnivores. *Ecology* 93: 921-929.
- ⁵ Flagel, D.G., G.E. Belovsky, and D.E. Beyer Jr. 2016. Natural and experimental tests of trophic cascades: gray wolves and white-tailed deer in Great Lakes forest. *Oecologia* 180: 1183-1194
- ⁶ David, P. 2009. Ma'iingan and the Ojibwe. Pp. 267-278 in A.P. Wydeven, T.R, Van Deelen, and E.J. Heske. *Recovery of Gray Wolves in the Great Lakes Region of the United States: An Endangered Species Success Story*. Springer, New York, New York, USA