

## Moving Wisconsin Forward with Wolf Management

In November 2022, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) released a long overdue Draft Wolf Management Plan reflecting the remarkable recovery of wolves in our state, new science and field experience, and growing social acceptance of wolves by the public. The November 2022 draft plan replaces a 1999 management plan written at a time when there were less than 200 wolves in Wisconsin.

*Wolves in Wisconsin today are a conservation success story.* Wolves have recovered from being eliminated in the 1950s, to a mostly stable population today with almost 1,000 animals that have occupied most favorable habitat. We can live with wolves if we are willing to do the work to balance competing interests and consider the needs of all stakeholders, using the best available science. Those stakeholders today include farmers, ranchers and other rural residents living in wolf country, Native American tribes with important legal rights and spiritual values, and all Wisconsin citizens who value conservation and wildlife.

Critics of WDNR's new Draft Wolf Management Plan have complained about the lack of numeric goals in the new plan and have claimed incorrectly that WDNR's previous 1999 wolf plan intended to limit the wolf population to 350 animals. In fact, the goal of 350 wolves set in 1999 was established as a *management goal* to be achieved at a time when less than 200 wolves were in Wisconsin. The 1999 plan states that 350 animals would be "*the minimum level at which proactive control and public harvest would occur,*" but nowhere does the 1999 plan state that the wolf population should be limited to 350 animals.

With 24 additional years of new scientific knowledge and management experience, we know that Wisconsin can support a much larger wolf population, with an estimated potential carrying capacity of as many as 1,200 animals. In most years generally less than 15% of wolf packs in Wisconsin cause depredations on pets or livestock. The trends in depredations have NOT increased in line with a growing wolf population, showing that with good overall management we can learn to live with wolves and properly manage to reduce wolf-related conflicts.

Our challenge today is managing wolves throughout their newly occupied range, while balancing hunting, lethal and non-lethal controls, and other active management strategies to mitigate human/wolf conflicts and educate citizens about living with wolves. The recent scientifically conducted public attitude survey shows most Wisconsin residents, including those in wolf range, support maintaining populations at about the 800-1,000 wolves we have in Wisconsin today.

Some have criticized the draft wolf plan for lacking a numeric population goal. In fact, our experience with other important wildlife species such as bear and deer in Wisconsin has proven that setting numeric goals for important wildlife populations is both unnecessary and is often counterproductive.

Numeric population goals are simply not necessary to manage wolf populations – in fact they just provide a focal point for political battles that take our focus away from better solutions. Instead, we should focus on other metrics such as wolf population health, levels of human/wolf conflicts, resilience of forests to deer browse damage, and the health of prey populations. These metrics can be used to determine if wolf populations in each of the six defined wolf zones should be reduced, maintained, or allowed to increase.

Wolves in the Great Lakes region are substantially recovered and are no longer biologically endangered. However, federal de-listing of wolves and the full range of active management tools, including legal hunting, that de-listing will provide can only be successful if states like Wisconsin are able to act responsibly as stewards of this iconic and important wildlife species.

Allowing proposals to kill more than 2/3 of today's wolf population to meet an outdated and arbitrary management ceiling of 350 animals would be highly controversial, would cause irreparable harm to relations with our tribal partners, and would cause significant genetic and biological harm to a recovering population. It would also be a signal to federal policy makers that states like Wisconsin cannot take their obligations seriously, making it far more likely that wolves remain federally listed for the foreseeable future – a lose-lose scenario for almost everyone. We can make much better choices than that.

The [Wisconsin Draft Wolf Management Plan](#) reflects a much smarter and balanced path forward with wolves in Wisconsin. The plan is available and open for public comment until February 28, 2023 here: [Wolf Management Plan | Wisconsin DNR](#).

Let's move Wisconsin forward with wolves, not backward.

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