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Commission's new wolf hunting season praised as 'science-based'; criticized as 'unethical and immoral'

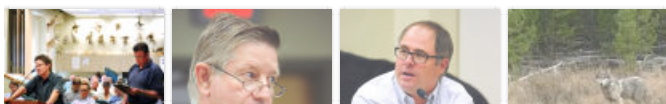
HUNTERS, TRAPPERS CAN TAKE UP TO 5 ANIMALS IN MOST AREAS IN LONGER 2013-14 SEASON

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Eliza Wiley Independent Record - Kim Bean, vice president of Wolves of the Rockies, was the first to the podium Wednesday as Montana Fish and Wildlife commissioners heard public comment on new regulations for the 2013/2014 wolf hunting and trapping season. Commissioners voted to lengthen the season and raise the wolf bag limit from one to five.

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Hunters and trappers will be able to use electronic calls and take up to five wolves in most areas of Montana during the 2013/2014 season, which will be the longest and most liberal season held so far in the Treasure State.

Yet Wednesday, the Fish and Wildlife Commission also pulled back on a couple of proposed changes to what it put forth earlier this year, including limiting hunters and trappers to one wolf per person taken just outside of Yellowstone National Park's northern boundary, and allowing a total of only seven wolves to be harvested in that area.

In addition, the commission shortened the wolf rifle hunting season proposal by two weeks — initially, the season was slated to run this year from Sept. 15, 2013 to March 31, 2014 — based on public comments regarding pregnant or lactating females. The wolf hunting season will now end March 15, 2014; that's still longer than last year's Feb 28 season end.

Trapping is slated to take place Dec. 15, 2013, through Feb. 28, 2014, which is the same as last year.

The wolf archery season is Sept. 7-14.

Another change this year includes a higher pan tension on wolf traps in Regions 1-5 to minimize the take of lynx, wolverine and other non-target species.

The commission deleted the initial staff proposal to allow hunters to take wolves that were sniffing around bait set in traps, after the FWP department decided it was too complicated to explain in regulations, as well as being controversial.

This is the fourth wolf hunting season in Montana, and the second trapping season. Last year, 128 hunters and 97 trappers harvested wolves; they were limited to one for most of the season.



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Another 108 wolves were removed for livestock predation, accidents or other causes.

Proponents

Some members of the audience lauded the upcoming season as “science-based” and a good compromise.

“This is a pretty reasonable proposal,” said Nick Gevock with the Montana Wildlife Federation. “Like everything, not everybody is happy and that’s what constitutes a compromise. ... I think the proposal is slightly aggressive, but again, we need to trust the biologists, the agency and the commission.”

Rod Bullis added that, to him, the proposal includes both fair chase and ethical hunting.

“I’ve noticed as an avid hunter ... that the wolf debate has toned down, and I think that’s because hunters and trappers are stepping up on that and the depredation removal has been successful,” Bullis said.

Opponents

Yet others, like Marc Cooke with Wolves of the Rockies, decried the new regulations as “ethically, morally and biologically wrong,” especially when it comes to taking the wolves near Yellowstone and extending the season into the spring.

“The impacts of a poor decision made today will be felt,” he said.

Gail Richardson, a naturalist from Bozeman, added that it sounds like wolf management has turned into wolf slaughter.

“It makes me ashamed to be a Montanan,” Richardson said. “I’m appalled that Montana hasn’t created buffer zones around the Park. Those are not Montana wolves, but they are the American public’s wolves. They know no boundaries.”

Others cautioned that by lowering the wolf limit near Yellowstone, FWP could inadvertently put trappers in tough position.

“If a trapper does it right, he could end up with multiple wolves in one day,” said Paul Rossignol with Montana Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife. “You need to watch and make sure they’re OK.”

And some just wanted to prohibit trapping completely.

“I’m absolutely disgusted and appalled at the policies with which wildlife is being managed in this state, particularly by allowing the trapping of wolves in Montana,” said Anja Heister, the former executive director of Footloose Montana. “Trapping of fur-bearing animals is disgusting in itself.”


Nearly 25K comments

Ken McDonald, chief of the FWP Wildlife Bureau, said they received 24,576 comments on the wolf season proposals. The majority were what he called “canned comments,” which is the same sentiment with the same wording sent in by 2,000 different people.

“One thing we look at is that a comment is not a vote, but more about what are the issues and concerns brought up about the proposal,” McDonald said. “We look for common themes.”


Those included:

- concerns that allowing one person to harvest up to five wolves near Yellowstone would hurt the park’s population;




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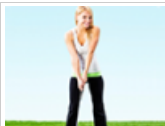




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- concerns that harvesting wolves will have a negative economic value because tourists no longer will be able to view them;
- people who opposed hunting, trapping or other types of harvest because of wolves' value in the ecosystem;
- the need for more management due to livestock losses and impacts to big game populations;
- making sure the state retains management of wolves, and treats them like other wildlife;
- that the harvest wasn't liberal enough and
- the general pros and cons of trapping.

"The comments relate back to the objectives,

and there's no consensus one way or another," McDonald said. "We are balancing a multitude of values and comments."

After listening to close to two hours of comments — with each person limited to two minutes — Commissioner Dan Vermillion said he's still amazed at how wolf management remains such a hot-button topic.

"Every single year you think it will be easier ... but every single year you still have good people on either side disagreeing on wolf management," Vermillion said. "With the initial proposal that came out in May, there was a lot of pushback, especially around Yellowstone National Park. We get accused of not listening to public comment, but in this case, I think we did."

He added that they'll revisit the wolf harvest at the commission's Dec. 10 meeting and may tweak the regulations based on what's taking place on the ground.

"I want to specifically put people on notice that at that meeting we may decide to summarily close some areas under Montana's wildlife management plan if there are concerns for the wolf population in a district," Vermillion said.

Reporter Eve Byron: 447-4076 or eve.byron@helenair.com. Follow Eve on Twitter @IR_EveByron.

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