

TWA Responds to 2021 Wolf Harvest  
Timber Wolf Alliance Statement  
By TWA Advisory Council  
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The February 2021 wolf hunting and trapping season will be remembered as a dark mark on a state with a rich history of sound and effective wildlife management.

Unlike past hunting and trapping seasons, which were highly regulated, based on sound science, and informed by an open and transparent public process, the February 2021 season was a politically-driven, court-ordered hunt done in haste, without adequate time for public input and consultation with scientists, stakeholders, and tribes.

The February 2021 season, which ended less than 72 hours after it started, resulted in a harvest at 182% of the state-licensed quota—meaning 216 wolves were killed, rather than 119.

In this regard, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources was set up to fail. The Wisconsin Natural Resources Board approved double the number of harvest permits recommended by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. This high ratio of hunters to quota, as well as the guidelines for reporting killed wolves (also set by the Natural Resources Board), the guidelines for closing zones to harvest (strangely established in state law), and the broad allowances of harvest methods (again, determined by state law) left the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources trying to manage a process they had little control over—not to mention, one that the public and the tribes had relatively little say in.

Most details regarding the wolf harvest in Wisconsin are dictated by state law rather than the Department of Natural Resources administrative rule as most other managed species in the state. Administrative rules are reviewed and modified through a very participatory process and are much more amendable compared to state laws.

The timing and impact of this season also create major difficulties for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources' efforts to set quotas for the fall of 2021. Aside from greatly exceeding the state-licensed quota, this hunting and trapping season also raises the following concerns:

The season occurred at the peak of the breeding season—which means it could very likely result in reduced reproduction—unlike a fall harvest which would have had less of an effect in this regard.

Due to the large number of wolves killed using hounds (86% of the kill), it is likely that multiple wolves were killed from individual packs—which increases the probability of a pack dissolving and failing to reproduce.

The coincidence of the February 2021 hunt with the Department of Natural Resources use of a new monitoring strategy, which uses occupancy models rather than the traditional minimum count system, will add additional challenges to future wolf conservation. It is also

unfortunate that the DNR opted not to collect certain biological data from harvested wolves that could have increased our understanding of the impact of this hunt.

It appears some harvesters may have contributed to this overharvest by encouraging others to delay as long as possible to report their take—a practice that can intentionally contribute to quotas being exceeded. This practice violates hunter ethics, taints the role of regulated hunting in wildlife management, and casts a pall of distrust. It also calls into question how future quotas for wolves will be established and managed.

This season has further strained state-tribal relations regarding the shared conservation of wildlife species, especially wolves, within the Ceded Territories of the Tribes, raising new questions regarding the expectations of quotas in state-tribal relations.

The process by which the February 2021 season unfolded demonstrates a profound disregard and disrespect for wolves, natural resource professionals, and the general public in the state. The implementation and execution of this hunt provides legitimate evidence for those who believe wolves continue to need the protections of the Endangered Species Act.

Wisconsin will soon be initiating preparations for a fall wolf hunting and trapping season. The state must learn from this season, and take significant steps to coordinate management objectives with tribal governments, provide adequate opportunity for public participation, consider the full range of public interests, and implement measures to ensure effective harvest control.

The Timber Wolf Alliance is committed to using science-based information to promote an ecologically-functional wolf population in areas of suitable habitat and to promoting human coexistence with wolves. The Timber Wolf Alliance is not opposed to regulated wolf hunting which is consistent with our “A Vision for Wolves in Wisconsin and Michigan.”

For questions or comments email SOEI Executive Director Alan Brew.