

Montana Reality Check

Folks,

When are we going to start protecting and recovering wildlife in the Northern Rockies?

Let's be frank. The imbalance between predator and prey in Montana and Idaho continues to result in dramatic declines in moose, elk and deer. In areas where high wolf populations exist, hunting opportunity for moose, elk, and deer is down and further restrictions are forthcoming. This runs contrary to MCA 87-1-217 which requires MDFWP to manage predators to meet the goal of preserving citizen's opportunities for hunting large game species.

The problem is that balance is not being restored in Montana. Data shows that wolf harvest must reach a minimum of 50% in consecutive years to reduce wolf populations. In 2009, total wolf mortalities in Montana reached approximately 50% of the confirmed population (255 of 524) and wolf populations increased to well over 525 documented wolves the following year. With the current excessive population of wolves, the hunting quota cap in Montana of 220 wolves is not sufficient to reduce wolf populations.

Now more bad news. The recent headline in Montana is "Western Montana wolf quotas still trailing." As of 12-19-11 Montana has only harvested 110 wolves in 2011. That represents only half of the quota and since general elk and deer seasons have closed, Montana won't have much chance of reaching their harvest objectives, even with the extended wolf hunts into February.

Remember, the Tester/Baucus language which delisted wolves in Montana and Idaho required ongoing federal oversight. States can only manage with permission from the federal government. Is the USFWS using this fact to mandate many restrictions on wolf harvest in these states? With excessive restrictions being imposed by federal officials, there is no evidence that states can manage wolves.

Numerous Examples of Excessive Restrictions in Montana

Low harvest objectives.

Ban on wolf trapping during wolf hunting season.

No baiting allowed.

No electronic calls allowed.

Only one tag per year per person.

A short general wolf season.

Ban on use of artificial scents or lures

Expensive tags. Currently resident wolf tags cost more than a deer tag. Nonresident tags cost \$350.

Federal Funding was cut for USDA wildlife services needed to control problem wolves.

Excessive time, place and manner restrictions now imposed on wildlife services even when funding is obtained.

Problem wolf removals are down.

47 removals in 2011 is now less than 1/3 compared to previous years (previous years approximately 150 problem wolves were removed).

Montana FWP is far more restrictive than the state of Idaho when it comes to wolf management. Many feel this is a result of pressure on the state from federal oversight. Regardless of the source of the pressure the fact is these restrictions are a result of politics, not good wildlife management policy.

Conclusion

The status quo is not working for Montana. It appears that warnings about the Tester/Baucus bill may have been well founded. The fact remains that the Tester/Baucus bill only allows the state of Montana to manage with permission from federal officials for the next 5 years.

Wolf hunting won't fix this mess. It is time for full authority over wolf populations to be returned to the people of the state of Montana. It is time for Montana FWP to acknowledge that excessive restrictions aren't working. It is time for leadership in the state of Montana needed to protect wildlife and livestock.

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