



ROB STAFSHOLT

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DATE: September 21, 2023
RE: Testimony on Senate Bill 139
TO: Members of the Committee on Financial Institutions & Sporting Heritage
FROM: Senator Rob Stafsholt

Thank you fellow members of the Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage for hearing Senate Bill 139 relating to establishing a statewide wolf population goal.

This is a very simple bill that requires the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to include an exact number for the wolf population goal in their wolf management plan. This bill does not change existing framework concerning a wolf harvest season, and it does not dictate a specific number. It merely requires the DNR to have a population goal in its wolf management plan. How the DNR manages the population to get to that goal is already in their management plan, and is not impacted by this bill. This bill simply requires the plan to use a population goal in Wisconsin.

Again, thank you for allowing me to testify on Senate Bill 139. I would appreciate your support on this piece of legislation.

September 21th, 2023

Testimony on Senate Bill 139

Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage

Thank you, Chairman Stafsholt and other Senate committee members, for having a hearing on Senate Bill 139, which would establish a statewide wolf population goal.

Every successful management plan has a set goal, and even though the Wisconsin DNR has worked with the public in establishing their current wolf management plan, it does not have a set population goal. I have talked to a lot of constituents up north about wolf management, and they want to see a population number put in place.

Other states, like Idaho and Wyoming, have a set population goal when it comes to gray wolves; why shouldn't Wisconsin? Idaho's wolf management plan states, "The Plan identifies goals and strategies to reduce wolf numbers and to manage Idaho's wolf population to fluctuate around 500 animals." Wyoming's plan states the "minimum population requirement of greater than or equal to 150 wolves and greater than or equal to 15 breeding pairs."

This bill would require the DNR to establish a wolf population goal. This bill does not change the existing framework concerning the wolf harvest season. It merely requires the DNR to have a population goal in its wolf management plan. How the DNR manages the population to get to that goal is already in their management plan and is not impacted by this bill.

I am grateful for the opportunity to work on this bill with my colleague from the Senate, Senator Stafsholt. Thank you for your time today, and thank you for your consideration of this bill.

SENATE BILL 139

Wolf management is a very contentious subject here in Wisconsin and has been for decades. We have had active management, we have lost active management, all due to federal implications of the endangered species act, all the while the wolf populations have continued to grow and become sustainable here in Wisconsin. As we continue to advocate and approach retaining active wolf management here in Wisconsin, we must protect and manage wolves and we must protect Wisconsin residents from growing wolf populations and the implications of having wolves on Wisconsin's landscapes. The best way to do so is to ensure we have population goals for wolves and we have fully vested counts for wolves state wide. Having goals simply ensures wolves have a very specific point of management to protect them as a population and to protect residents of Wisconsin from unnecessary impacts from wolves. Many opinions exist in regards to how many wolves exist on the landscape in Wisconsin, but we should all agree that knowing how many wolves we have and how many we agree to maintain is good for wolves and good for residents of Wisconsin living with the implications of wolves. I urge you to pass senate bill 139 mandating a numeric and value based wolf population goal as part of the states wolf management plan.

Lucas Withrow



Wisconsin Bear Hunters' Association, Inc.

To: All Senators
From: Wisconsin Bear Hunters' Association
Date: Thursday, September 21, 2023
RE: SB 139

The Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association (WBHA) supports SB 139. Wisconsin hunters, and other stakeholders, deserve to have certainty regarding the state's plan to manage wolves.

WBHA is in support of developing a useful wolf management plan. We were integrally involved in the creation of a statutory wolf harvest season and have been frustrated by the continued court challenges to the delisting of wolves by animal rights extremists.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has done an excellent job of making sure the wolf population in our state is healthy enough to merit delisting. Historically, they have done an excellent job of managing wolf harvest seasons, despite most recently resisting having a season altogether.

However, the recently released wolf management plan comes short of our expectations. WBHA and many other sporting organizations, farm groups, and local governments have long supported an over winter population goal of 350 wolves. We support having the management tools in place to achieve this goal.

Although the plan as drafted has outlined some population numbers, the plan does not tie any particular management practices to those numbers. This leaves the citizens of Wisconsin in the dark regarding management practices, and gives the DNR total control of the plan implementation without any accountability.

Additionally, the released plan does not address the significant shortfall in the DNR's efforts to accurately account for all the wolves in the state. The released plan seems to ask for more road closures on public lands – which will prevent hunters and other citizens from accessing our taxpayer funded lands. In particular, the released plan seems biased against hunters and hound hunters.

As drafted, the wolf plan contains buffer zones around tribal lands which will leave farms unprotected and hunters with less opportunities to harvest wolves or protect their hunting dogs from depredation.

We support SB 139 as a great step towards creating a more responsive and workable wolf management plan.



WISCONSIN WILDLIFE FEDERATION

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AFFILIATED WITH THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

September 21, 2023

Wisconsin Wildlife Federation Testimony on SB 139-Wolf Population Goal

On behalf of the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 139. The Federation is the state's largest conservation organization with over 200 affiliate organizations with the great majority being local rod and gun clubs across the state. Hundreds of members of our organization and our affiliates live in parts of the state with a substantial number of wolves. A major part of the Mission of the Federation is advocating for sound conservation policies in Wisconsin and the country with an emphasis on fish, wildlife and their habitats. The Federation has been and remains a strong supporter of sound and professional natural resource management.

The Federation has long been involved with the issue of wolf management in the state. The Federation has been a very active supporter of protecting and recovering endangered species in the state including the recovery of wolves in the Upper Midwest. The Federation was significantly involved in the development of the 1999 and the 2006 wolf management plans and has been very active in the process to develop the new DNR Wolf Management Plan. The Federation has been on every DNR Wolf Stakeholder Advisory Committee ever established and recently WWF hosted three public hearings in Northern Wisconsin in which many farmers, other landowners and sportsmen and women detailed the adverse effect that wolves have had on them and their families.

The Federation respectfully requests that SB-139 should consider the following amendments.

1. The bill should specify that the new Wolf Management Plan continue the practice of the 1999 and 2006 plans by establishing a specific numerical statewide population goal for wolves. A plan that would include a non-numerical, narrative type statewide wolf population goal will lead to the real potential of highly subjective interpretations and disagreements on when the wolf population is above, below or at the goal. Wolf management is and is likely to continue as a controversial issue in the state and it is important that the Wolf Management Plan goal contain an objective numerical standard for management purposes.
2. The legislation should specify that the plan contain a numerical wolf population goal reflecting the need to significantly reduce the adverse effects of wolf predation on farmers, other landowners and sportsmen and women. Sound natural resource management needs to reflect not only the biological carrying capacity of a species but also the social carrying capacity which gives substantial weight to the impacts on local individuals adversely affected by wolves.
3. The legislation should establish a realistic timeline for the Department to bring the state's wolf population to be at or near a numerical population goal. There is ongoing significant adverse impact from wolf predation on farmers, other landowners and sportsmen and women and it is critically important that the wolf population in the state be managed in a timely manner to reduce the harm to those that are being significantly damaged by the wolf population. However, the pace of the reduction of the wolf population to a proper numerical goal reflecting the social carrying capacity needs to be done in a careful and possibly phased manner.

Submitted by George Meyer, WWF Board Member

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Testimony on Senate Bill 139

September 21, 2023

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Committee Members, for this hearing today and for the opportunity to comment on Senate Bill 139.

The Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation (WFBF) is the state's largest general agriculture organization with over 47,000 members. WFBF represents farms of different sizes, commodities and management styles. WFBF appreciates Senator Rob Stafsholt and Representative Rob Swearingen introducing legislation to establish a state wolf population goal.

WFBF supports many of the goals and objectives in the Wolf Management Draft Plan and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) ongoing efforts to maintain a healthy wolf population. While the 2023 Wolf Management Plan doesn't define a healthy wolf population, the previous wolf management plan used the latest science and computer simulations to estimate a wolf population of 300-500 wolves has a high probability of persisting for 100 years. The 1999 plan established a state-delisting goal of 250 wolves and a management goal of 350 wolves. WFBF supports returning to the 1999 management goal for a healthy wolf population.

Wisconsin Farm Bureau has concerns associated with the draft version of the Wolf Management Plan. Our principal concern, and one we advocated for as a member of the Wolf Management Plan Committee, is the lack of a numeric population goal. The current plan has a numeric population goal of 350 wolves. The draft plan instead favors an adaptive management approach in which a set of ambiguous objectives are set. The lack of a set numeric goal makes setting consistent zone harvest quotas virtually impossible as these objectives are broadly stated and easily redefined by the department.

In response to overwhelming public comments, the department was forced to add guidance with management goals based on population sizes. During the discussion of the Wolf Management Plan Committee, 10 members of the committee supported returning to a numeric population model. Unfortunately, the department has stated the population management goals added to the plan are simply guidance, not to be used to inform management decisions.

Throughout the process DNR has ignored rural Wisconsin and instead chosen a process that allows out of state special interests to drown out rural communities. WFBF, along with other rural stakeholders, have advocated for an in person public hearing on the draft wolf management plan. DNR has instead held online comment periods that have not differentiated Wisconsin residents from out of state special interests. DNR's process weighs a resident of California's opinion the same as Wisconsin, this is just wrong and a disservice to rural Wisconsin residents who live every day with the threat of wolf-related conflict.

While WFBF supports the intent of Senate Bill 139, we would recommend a slight change in language. On line 8, WFBF recommends inserting the word “numeric” between statewide and wolf and “of 350 wolves” at the end. Line 8 would then read “that establishes a statewide numeric wolf population goal of 350 wolves.”

In conclusion, Wisconsin Farm Bureau supports the intent of Senate Bill 139. WFBF would ask the authors to amend the language to clarify the intent of the authors to the department. Again, thank you to Senator Rob Stafsholt and Representative Rob Swearingen for authoring Senate Bill 139.

Tyler Wenzlaff
Director of National Affairs
Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation



**Testimony to the Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage in
opposition to Senate Bill 139**

September 21, 2023

On behalf of the Humane Society of the United States and our supporters, I am writing in opposition to Senate Bill 139. The best available science supports the DNR's decision to remove an outdated and unscientific numeric population goal from the wolf management plan. As written, this bill would force the DNR to manage wolves based on politics, not sound science.

Numerical population goals are outdated thinking. Most wildlife management plans have goals related to land and habitat conservation, not numeric limits. In fact, the current black bear management plan includes an objective to eliminate the numeric population goals that were defined in state statute, an action that was accomplished in 2020. Likewise, Wisconsin does not have a statewide deer population goal either. The DNR has told me that the few remaining plans that include numerical population goals are outdated, or are plans for species who are not yet well established in the state.

Additionally, the majority of Wisconsinites value wolves. According to the 2022 survey conducted by the Wisconsin DNR, 66% of Wisconsin residents want the same number or more wolves in the state, compared to just 19% who want fewer wolves.¹ Additionally, compared to a similar 2014 survey, higher proportions of both residents who live in areas with wolves and those who don't would like about the same number or more wolves.² In other words, support for a wolf population at the current level or higher is growing, even among residents who share the landscape with wolves. Furthermore, a 2021 survey conducted by Remington Research Group found that 60% of Wisconsinites oppose the trophy hunting and trapping of wolves, compared to just 24% who support such seasons.³

For years this species, beloved by Wisconsinites and tourists, has been persecuted and politicized. No other species in Wisconsin has had its fate determined by lawmakers.

Finally, wolf populations do not need to be "managed" to specific numbers through human intervention.⁴ Scientific studies show that wolf populations are generally limited by prey availability, as well as disease, human densities, terrain, and their own territorial and social nature.⁵ Wolves do not need to be "controlled" to an arbitrary numerical goal, but rather the goal should be for Wisconsin to have a self-sustaining, self-regulating, and genetically diverse population that maintains connectivity with wolf populations in neighboring states and fulfills its ecological role. Killing even one wolf may destabilize a wolf pack leading to unintended consequences for Wisconsin's farmers.⁶ It's time to move to new peer-reviewed science about wolf management—where we prioritize co-existence over random, wanton killing.

For all of these reasons, I respectfully ask that you vote no on Senate Bill 139.



Attn: Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage
Re: SB 139 – Establishing a Statewide Wolf Population Goal
Position: Support
Date: September 19, 2023

Honorable Members of the Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage,

I write you today on behalf of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) to express support for Senate Bill 139, introduced by Wisconsin Legislative Sportsmen's Caucus Co-Chair Senator Rob Stafsholt, which would require that when implementing a statewide wolf management plan (WMP), the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) must include a wolf population goal within that plan. I respectfully request that the honorable members of this Committee support the passage of SB 139.

Founded in 1989, the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation is the informed authority across outdoor issues and serves as the primary conduit for influencing public policy. Working with the Congressional Sportsmen's Caucus (CSC), the Governors Sportsmen's Caucus (GSC), and the National Assembly of Sportsmen's Caucuses (NASC), CSF gives a voice to hunters, anglers, recreational shooters, and trappers on Capitol Hill and throughout state capitols advocating on vital outdoor issues that are the backbone of our nation's conservation legacy.

Including a numeric population goal within WMPs is a common practice followed by state wildlife management agencies across the country where wolves exist. Without a numeric goal, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will not have an accurate frame of reference to evaluate whether its WMP is operating as intended. Wisconsin is home to roughly 1,100 wolves, which freely range in and out of Minnesota and Michigan, creating a regional population exceeding 4,000 wolves. CSF contends that this wolf population has fully recovered and is fit to be delisted and actively managed by the individual states. However, without a mandatory population goal, the DNR cannot implement management practices that aim to achieve a specific outcome, which will likely cause wolf populations to continue to grow beyond what is healthy for not only wolves, but cattle, elk, deer, and other Wisconsin game species.

This bill remedies the possibility that the DNR may exclude a numeric population goal from its final WMP, which would render the plan ineffective, because without a measurable goal, the DNR cannot possibly evaluate whether its management practices are achieving intended results. To protect the ecosystems and wildlife populations of Wisconsin, CSF recommends that the DNR establish a population goal that is lower than the state's current wolf population, which this bill makes possible. I thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments and welcome any questions.

Sincerely,

Robert Matthews

Senior Coordinator, Great Lakes States
Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation
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Your Inside Connection to Outdoor Legislation



Senate Committee on Financial Institutions and Sporting Heritage

Senate Bill 139

Establishing a Statewide Wolf Population Goal.

September 21, 2023

Good afternoon, Chair Stafsholt, and members of the Committee. My name is Randy Johnson, and I serve as the Large Carnivore Specialist for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. With me today to help answer questions is Eric Lobner, Director of the Wildlife Management Program. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in opposition to Senate Bill 139, relating to establishing a statewide wolf population goal.

Since early 2021, the department has been working hard to develop an updated state wolf management plan. This process has included extensive public input and engagement, detailed reviews of relevant wildlife and social science, and ongoing conversations with Wisconsin's Tribal Nations. We've gone to great lengths to listen to the public's diverse perspectives regarding wolf management and develop a plan that strikes a balance among these diverse interests. The revised version of the draft plan was shared publicly last month, and we plan to present it to the Natural Resources Board (NRB) for their review and approval at October's NRB meeting.

This plan recognizes the biologically recovered status of gray wolves in Wisconsin and turns attention from wolf recovery to long-term sustainable management of wolves in the state. It demonstrates the state's dual commitments of maintaining a sustainable and ecologically functional wolf population while also being responsive in addressing wolf-related conflicts and concerns.

Notably, the plan does not include a targeted statewide population size or goal by which to guide management actions. While such numeric population goals may be appropriate for a recovering species, having static abundance goals often becomes ineffective and even unnecessary when considering the social, biological, and legal complexities of a recovered wolf population. In addition, there are some significant challenges with determining what is the 'appropriate' population number that reflects the broad range of social preferences among the Wisconsin public and the biological considerations of a dynamic wildlife population. Further, a single statewide numeric population goal may fail to consider the geographic distribution of wolves in the state and varying levels across the state as biological and social carrying capacities change over time in one location to the next.

Instead, the plan recommends adjusting management actions, such as conflict abatement and public harvest, in response to real-world conditions observed on the ground. This style of adaptive management ultimately strives to find ongoing balance among the public's preferences regarding the benefits of wolves and negative interactions with wolves. It is more scientifically defensible than a static numeric population goal and, therefore, also more likely to support the long-term maintenance of full management authority upon future wolf delisting.

Utilizing the adaptive management approach identified in the management plan, changes in wolf population abundance and distribution would be the result of varying levels of regulated public harvest of wolves, when legally allowed, as well as natural wolf population dynamics. Based on state statute, an annual regulated wolf harvest season would occur when wolves are not listed on the federal or state endangered species list, with management and harvest actions informed by this plan and designed to help balance the objectives identified in the plan.

This approach is expected to generally maintain statewide wolf abundance and distribution at levels comparable to recent years, while explicitly allowing for fluctuations in local wolf densities, including population reductions as warranted.

In response to public feedback and to provide additional transparency in expected statewide population sizes under this plan, a table with various statewide population sizes and likely statewide population management outcomes was added to the revised version of the plan. The intent of this table is to provide guidelines only and does not establish any population size as a management goal. The information in this table was developed based upon the prevailing wildlife science and a full suite of biological and social factors, including recognition that the Wisconsin wolf population has biologically recovered.

Any future wolf harvest recommendations should consider not only these guidelines, but also the objectives and metrics of the management plan, legal requirements, any scientific developments, and other relevant biological and social factors. The department's wolf advisory committee should play a key role in this process to ensure inclusion of all perspectives during these discussions.

This plan provides a practical vision for wolf management and stewardship in the years ahead. If fully implemented, this plan would support the perpetuation of a healthy wolf population in Wisconsin to fulfill its numerous roles and benefits, while also being responsive in effectively addressing wolf-related conflicts and concerns, particularly for those who are most affected by living or recreating among wolves in Wisconsin.

On behalf of the Department of Natural Resources, we would like to thank you for your time today. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.