

MICHIGAN WOLF FORUM 2012



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INTRODUCTION

The 2008 Michigan Wolf Management Plan (Wolf Plan) provides strategic guidance for wolf management in Michigan. It was developed to help 1) maintain a viable Michigan wolf population above a level that would warrant its classification as threatened or endangered; 2) facilitate wolf-related benefits; 3) minimize wolf-related conflicts; and 4) conduct science-based wolf management with socially acceptable methods. The Wolf Plan includes directions for establishing regular communications among agencies, tribes, the general public, and other stakeholder groups. These communications will allow interested parties to monitor progress made toward full implementation of the Wolf Plan and provide opportunities for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) to receive input on specific management issues.

To facilitate these benefits, the Wolf Forum was created. Members of the Wolf Forum are representatives from various agencies, tribes, and stakeholder groups that represent the broad array of values and interests concerning wolves and wolf management in Michigan. The Wolf Forum convenes at a minimum on an annual basis to discuss wolf management goals, educational opportunities, conflict resolutions, and other topics as needed.

To be considered for Wolf Forum membership, an organization must:

- provide broad representation of the relevant interest group based on membership;
- be acknowledged as an acceptable representative by a majority of that interest group;
- have clearly identifiable and extensive interests in wolf-related issues;
- be willing to commit resources (time, travel, personnel) to participate; and
- be able to provide a suitable spokesperson that is cooperative, knowledgeable, open-minded, and dedicated.

The first Wolf Forum meeting occurred in June 2010. The 2012 Wolf Forum meeting was hallmarked as the first meeting since the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) removed (i.e., delisted) wolves under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Because of this action, the State of Michigan now has full management authority for wolves in Michigan. The 2012 Wolf Forum meeting was intended to provide the MDNR with input about priority action items, or the most important wolf management needs, to consider when implementing the Wolf Plan, especially given delisting. MDNR was also interested in feedback about wolf-related information and education (I&E), such as current and future potential materials and programs.

This report represents a summary of feedback about specific management questions provided by members during the 2012 Wolf Forum. First, priority action items and criteria for prioritization are described. Second, I&E partnerships and evaluation are discussed. Questions posed to Wolf Forum members were presented to the audience on paper; no

audience members submitted written feedback. Members discussed and debated opinions about topics; consensus was not a goal. Findings presented herein do not represent consensus within the group; rather, the range of opinions is presented.

FACILITATED DISCUSSION 1: PRIORITY ACTION ITEMS

The Wolf Plan identifies goals, strategies, objectives, and actions for wolf management in Michigan. The entire Plan is now actionable, since wolves were delisted January 2012. Members brainstormed answers to three questions within the context of the current MDNR budget, biological status of wolves, and depredation activities.

WHAT ACTION ITEMS COULD MDNR IMPLEMENT NOW FOR WOLF MANAGEMENT?

Wolf Forum members provided a range of opinions regarding action items to be implemented in the near term for wolf management. Members identified a need to focus management on a regional scale and maintain the capacity to mitigate wolf conflicts. Many members mentioned a lack of understanding about the current status of goal achievement (e.g., what goals have been achieved, what goals have been advanced)? In no particular order, members highlighted a need to:

Maintain active research and monitoring programs to support science-based wolf management. Most members discussed this action within the context of both biological and social research. Some identified a need to continue surveillance and intervention of depredation events (e.g., verified depredation events, indemnifications, non-lethal interventions such as donkeys and fences, verbal consultations). Members suggested a need to continue exploring the impacts of wolves on ecosystems (e.g., predator-prey project, disease impacts). They also discussed data currently collected by MDNR (e.g., depredation statistics, number of packs, pack size and distribution) as well as data collected by other institutions (e.g., Predator Prey Project out of Mississippi State University). Some members expressed a need for social science research (e.g., social carrying capacity, risk perceptions, attitudes about depredation response activities, wolf conflicts). Multiple members explained the Upper Peninsula should be targeted explicitly and prioritized for social science research given those residents live with wolves, whereas others pointed out that Lower Peninsula stakeholders should also be included because wolves are a public trust resource. This was the only action item that Wolf Forum members discussed within the context of maintaining federal compliance (see Federal Compliance subheading below for more information about the compliance discussion).

Increase public awareness and understanding of wolves and wolf-related issues. In addition to knowledge transfer between MDNR and Wolf Forum members, some members specified they desired additional information about how MDNR was being proactive on minimizing wolf conflicts and wolf management in general. Information was also requested about how management actions connect to goals and what goals have been achieved to date. Members discussed increased frequency and diversity of outreach messages (e.g., newspaper articles, depredation statistics on website) as being key to increasing transparency of research and

management data. Within the context of this discussion, specific stakeholder groups were mentioned, in no particular order:

- Livestock producers might benefit from information about nonlethal options and best management practices such as fencing, guard dogs, and donkeys.
- Bear hunters with dogs might benefit from information about the specific packs known to depredate free-range hunting dogs.
- Upper Peninsula residents might benefit from information about wolf distribution, management, policy, and living with wolves (e.g., protecting human safety).
- Michigan residents might benefit from information about wolf distribution, management, policy, and living with wolves.
- Wolf Forum members might benefit from information about general wolf population and management status updates, information about what they can do to reach out to members and promote positive wolf-related action, budgetary allocations including indemnities (e.g., compensation), and depredation permitting process (e.g., Public Acts 290 and 318).

Manage wolf depredation on domestic animals. Some members identified the need to eliminate or manage depredation on free-range hunting dogs at a wolf pack level, particularly among packs known to target free-ranging hunting dogs. Both lethal and non-lethal activities were debated. Site visits to livestock producers experiencing depredations were also considered (e.g., how to continue them in the face of budgetary cuts, what is the impact of advice about best management practices on depredation, how can partnerships between advice-giving agencies be maintained) as well as nonlethal management strategies to reduce depredation (e.g., donkeys, fences). Many members requested clarification about the current procedures and protocols used to issue wolf depredation permits and damage control forms. There was little discourse about non hunting-dog depredation by wolves beyond conflict involving wolves entering city limits (e.g., Ironwood, MI in 2012) and threatening public safety.

Develop and implement a socially and biologically responsible policy regarding public harvest of wolves for the purpose of reducing conflict. Wolf Forum members debated this action within the context of both livestock and free-ranging hunting dog depredation (see above). The adequacy of existing policies (e.g. Public Acts 290 and 318) in place since 2008 was considered, especially the language regarding "in-the-act" and "on-property." The efficacy of trained field staff messages about best management practices on farms was also discussed, in general and in the face of declining budget allocations.

WHAT CRITERIA COULD MDNR CONSIDER TO PRIORITIZE ACTION ITEMS FOR WOLF MANAGEMENT?

Acknowledging the budgetary climate that MDNR under which MDNR is currently operating, Wolf Forum members identified four overarching criteria that could be used to prioritize the implementation of action items, in no particular order.

Social Carrying Capacity. Social carrying capacity refers to the range bounded by the minimum and maximum numbers of wolves society will tolerate. Social carrying capacity is strongly influenced by the actual and perceived benefits and costs associated with particular levels of wolf abundance and distribution. The notion figures prominently in the Wolf Plan. Multiple Wolf Forum members identified a need for actions that facilitate creating or maintaining high social carrying capacity as being a criteria with which to prioritize action implementation. No specific actions for building social carrying capacity were discussed.

Federal Compliance. The USFWS does not prescribe specific details of how wolves should be managed by states once they are delisted. After delisting, the role of USFWS is to ensure wolves are adequately monitored for at least 5 years. If it appears the status of the gray wolf warrants Endangered Species Act protections, the Service can start the normal, or emergency, listing process. The circumstances that would cause the USFWS to consider relisting the Gray Wolf Western Great Lakes Distinct Population Segment (of which Michigan wolves are part of) are detailed on the USFWS website: www.fws.gov/midwest/wolf/monitoring/FinalWGL_PDM_Plan.htm#events. Members appeared to be in agreement that compliance with federal standards was an essential criterion to consider when prioritizing the implementation of action items.

Economic Impacts. Economic impacts from wolves and wolf management range from financial losses from livestock, dog, or pet depredation to benefits from wolf-related tourism and recreation. Wolf Forum members distinguished economic impacts as another criterion by which action implementation could be prioritized. Specifically, members identified costs such as capital resources to conduct research and pay wolf-related personnel, funds to indemnify compensation for wolf depredation, and resources to cover non-lethal conflict mitigation strategies. Finally, some members discussed focusing MDNR funds toward actions that cannot be funded by partners or through grants; specific actions were not delineated.

Impacts on Wolf Conflict. Wolf conflicts may entail conflicts between wolves and people, wolves and domestic animals (e.g., livestock, free-ranging hunting dogs, pets), or people and people over wolf policies and management activities. Minimizing wolf-related conflicts is an essential element of the Wolf Plan. As such, Wolf Forum members proposed prioritizing actions based on the extent to which they reduce negative conflicts. Conflict management activities include lethal and non-lethal strategies, may be highly localized, and occur over different temporal scales.

HOW WILL MDNR KNOW SUITABLE PROGRESS ON IMPLEMENTED ACTION ITEMS IS BEING MADE?

Members discussed opportunities for increased communication, and thus transparency, of current wolf management efforts. Increased communication between MDNR and Wolf Forum members, wildlife personnel who respond to depredation events and publics, and

MDNR and publics (via MDNR website, listserv, and press releases) were all identified as evidence that MDNR was making progress on implementing action items.

FACILITATED DISCUSSION 2: INFORMATION & EDUCATION

The Wolf Plan discusses extensively public education and communication in wolf management. Wolf Forum members answered questions focused on *partnerships* related to and *evaluation* of information and education (I&E) programs. Answers were discussed within the context of the current MDNR budget climate, biological status of wolves, and depredation activities.

PARTNERSHIPS

Wolf Forum members discussed the attributes of an ideal wildlife management partnership in general and wolf management specifically. Key characteristics identified include, in no particular order:

Communication. Timely discourse in diverse formats (e.g., formal report, electronic, two-way, repeated) is paramount for effective partnerships. There may be disagreements among partners at times, but communication channels need to remain open. Participants alluded to communication point-persons—one individual or small group of individuals who are responsible for maintaining communication within the network. The content of communications is important—there is a need for a larger amount of factual information about wolves and wolf management (there was no discussion about current information being incorrect). There is also a need to consider the communication capacity of different partners (e.g., some partners may not communicate electronically).

Resource Sharing. Resource needs are specific to the partnership and may change over time. Ideally, partners draw on the strengths of other individual partners for the benefit of the partnership (e.g., human capital, information, web design, legislative activities). Participants were not clear as to what all the needs of wolf management partners were—needs and wants could be communicated so that resource sharing could be improved. Some identified a need for partners to communicate about resource sharing opportunities one-on-one.

Common Purpose. Oftentimes, partners share common wildlife management goals even though they may believe there are different means to achieve goals. Partnerships may involve more than 2 groups/agencies/organizations and the relationship between and among these groups may differ at a micro-level.

Wolf Forum members distinguished barriers to successful wildlife partnerships, including a lack of funding and a lack of adjustment to the changing composition of "traditional" wildlife partnerships (e.g., involving a limited set of stakeholder groups). Participants

alluded to the fact that new partners could be engaged, such as the non-consumptive recreation groups (e.g., backpacking, hiking, wildlife watching) and ecotourists. Specific opportunities for resource sharing and communication related to partnerships were collected via index cards but are not detailed here.

EVALUATION

The Wolf Plan identifies multiple opportunities for outreach, education, and communication among and between various wolf management stakeholders. Wolf Forum members identified a number of outcomes that could help determine if I&E efforts are successful. The majority of metrics were quantitative. Although some members mentioned the public's social carrying capacity of wolves and wolf management, they did not explicitly identify evaluation metrics specific to this topic.

- number of articles printed/posted
- Google diagnostics (e.g., website hits, Facebook "likes", Twitter followers)
- number of TV interviews
- reduction in the number of illegally killed wolves
- efforts tailored to certain audiences (e.g., Upper Peninsula residents)
- decreased number of depredation events and indemnities
- other wolf management trends (e.g., number of wolf packs, DNA analysis, illegal take in wolves, geospatial information about depredations)
- number of on-site visits and communication of best management practices to farms with depredations
- number of non-lethal interventions (e.g., donkeys, guard dogs)
- number of private permits to kill wolves

CONCLUSION

The 2012 Wolf Forum provided MDNR with an opportunity to receive feedback from diverse wolf stakeholders, the public to observe and provide written comments, and members to present opinions about wolf management in Michigan. In sum, Wolf Forum members identified four overarching action items for wolf management in Michigan but did not prioritize them: active research, public awareness, depredation management, and harvest policy development. Members presented criteria that could be considered in prioritizing action items: social carrying capacity, federal compliance, economic impacts, and impacts on wolf conflict. Limited metrics for progress were delineated. Characteristics of ideal wolf management partnerships were established: communication, resource sharing, and common purpose. Mostly quantitative, outcome-oriented metrics for I&E evaluation were delineated. The Wolf Forum concluded with an expectation of this report being presented to the MDNR, being shared with members in a timely fashion, and posted online.