

July 11, 2013

**Rationale and Basis of Natural Resources Commission
for its Approval and Adoption of
Wildlife Conservation Order Amendments 13 and 14 of 2013**

1. Effective January 27, 2012, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed gray wolves living in the Western Great Lakes region (which includes Michigan) from the federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. This returned management authority over Michigan's gray wolf population to the State of Michigan.
2. With the enactment of 2012 PA 520 ("PA 520") effective December 28, 2012, the Michigan Legislature designated the wolf as a game animal and authorized the Natural Resources Commission ("NRC") to establish the first open hunting season for wolf. The Legislature further authorized the NRC to establish annual wolf hunting seasons "throughout the state."
3. Under MCL 324.40113a, the NRC has exclusive authority to regulate the taking of game in Michigan. In exercising that authority, the NRC shall, to the greatest extent practicable, utilize principles of sound scientific wildlife management, which has been found to be in the public interest. The NRC may consider all options with respect to the harvest of game, including wolves.
4. Pursuant to its exclusive authority, the Natural Resources Commission adopted Wildlife Conservation Order Amendment No. 6 of 2013, as amended (the "May Wildlife Order"), which has the effect of establishing a 2013 public hunting season for wolves in three (3) geographic areas of the Upper Peninsula, all as provided in the Order.
5. Subsequent to the adoption of the May Wildlife Order, 2013 PA 21 ("PA 21") was signed into law by the Governor and given immediate effect. PA 21 amends Part 401 of the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, MCL 324.40101 et seq., and allows the NRC to designate game species and establish the first hunt for such species, as well as maintaining the NRC's exclusive authority to regulate the taking of game.
6. Subsequent to the enactment of PA 21, the Board of State Canvassers certified a referendum petition that will place PA 520 on the November 2014 general election ballot. The Attorney General has previously opined that a law subject to referendum is suspended until the outcome of the next general election. OAG, 2011-2012, No 7267 (August 6, 2012). Due to the referendum regarding PA 520, the NRC now lacks the authority to take action pursuant to PA 520, at least until the results of the November 2014 general election are known.
7. In view of certification of the referendum with respect to PA 520, the NRC's actions with respect to Wildlife Conservation Order Amendments 13 and 14 of 2013 shall be based upon the authority provided to it by PA 21.
8. In considering the adoption of Wildlife Conservation Order Amendments 13 and 14 of 2013, the NRC notes that a significant amount of work was completed in connection with its consideration of the May Wildlife Order. The research, testimony, information, and data underlying the NRC's consideration of the May Wildlife Order is equally applicable to its consideration of designating the wolf as a game species, as proposed in Wildlife

Conservation Order Amendment 13 of 2013, and of establishing a 2013 public hunting season for wolves, as proposed in Wildlife Conservation Order Amendment 14 of 2013. In particular, the NRC notes:

- The NRC asked the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (“DNR”) for its recommendation (“Staff Recommendation”) with respect to whether to have a public hunting season for wolves, and regarding the parameters of such a season. The DNR has delivered its Staff Recommendation to the NRC. The DNR also provided a presentation to, and answered questions from, the Wildlife and Fisheries Committee of the NRC (“Committee”).
- At the request of the Chairman of the NRC, the Committee undertook a review of the Staff Recommendation; reviewed other relevant information concerning wolf hunting and its effects upon wolf populations; and sought out and considered testimony from other experts in the field with respect to wolf hunting issues, wolf biology, and wolf population matters. The Committee’s review included consideration of the experiences of other states, both inside and outside the Western Great Lakes region, that have already held public hunting seasons for wolves. This included, in part, discussions of the establishment of wolf management zones in each state, whether and how target harvests were established, how licenses were authorized and sold, how harvest reporting occurred, and the impact of open public hunting upon those states’ wolf populations.
- DNR staff and members of the NRC consulted with Native American Tribes and other interested organizations regarding a wolf hunt.
- The NRC and Committee received recommendations from the Wolf Management Advisory Council (WMAC) formulated during their meetings this year. These recommendations are the perspective of the WMAC on the potential consequences should a public harvest of wolves be implemented.
- The Committee received written comments from Drs. David Mech (personal views, Senior Research Scientist, U.S. Geological Survey, Adjunct Professor, University of Minnesota, Co-Chair, IUCN Wolf Specialist Group), Rolf Peterson (Research Professor of Wildlife Ecology, Michigan Technological University), and John Vucetich (Associate Professor of Wildlife Ecology, Michigan Technological University). These comments offered additional perspectives regarding a potential public harvest of wolves in Michigan.
- The Committee heard a presentation from Mr. Daniel Stark, Wolf Specialist, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources on the Minnesota wolf management program and wolf hunting in Minnesota.
- The Committee heard a presentation from Mr. William Vander Zouwen, Chief, Wildlife Ecology Section, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on the Wisconsin wolf management program and wolf hunting in Wisconsin.

- The Committee heard a presentation from Mr. Roger LaBine, Conservation Committee Chair for the Lac Vieux Desert Band of Chippewa Indians on the spiritual importance of wolves to Michigan Native American tribes.
 - The Committee heard a presentation from Christian A. Smith, Western Field Representative for the Wildlife Management Institute and former policy advisor to the Governor of Montana regarding wolf and grizzly bear management. The Committee found Mr. Smith's presentation to be particularly helpful because Montana has conducted three public hunts of wolves: 2009, 2011, and 2012. While the total wolf harvest from all sources resulted in over 300 wolves harvested from a minimum population of approximately 630, there appeared to be no significant impact on wolf populations.
 - The Committee heard a presentation from James H. Hammill, a Certified Wildlife Biologist, speaking for himself, former member of the International Wolf Center's Board of Directors, and resident of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP). Among other things, Mr. Hammill discussed how the viability of Michigan's wolf population depends on its ability to peacefully coexist with humans; that it is common for wolves and people to be in close proximity in the UP; and that he has perceived an erosion in UP residents' attitudes towards wolves, which he attributes to the inability to use lawful public harvest as a means of reducing conflict. Mr. Hammill recommended a limited-quota wolf hunt "across most of the UP landscape," consistent with the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.
9. The Michigan wolf population has grown from approximately 3 wolves in 1989 to approximately 658 wolves in 2013. In the eight (8) year period between late winter 1997 and late winter 2005, Michigan's wolf population had a double digit growth rate every year. Annual growth rates have slowed somewhat in recent years, and the late winter 2013 population minimum count estimate of 658 shows a reduction from the late winter 2011 population estimate of 687. However, Dr. David Mech, a recognized wolf expert whose work has been relied upon by the DNR, has stated that you cannot conclude that the Upper Peninsula wolf population has declined by comparing 2011 minimum winter survey results to 2013 minimum winter survey results. Nonetheless, Michigan's late winter 2013 wolf population is 62% larger than the late winter population of 2005, and more than 200% larger than the late winter population of 2000. This experience appears to mirror the experience in other states. The NRC is particularly mindful of the similar growth rates in other Western Great Lakes states, Minnesota and Wisconsin.
10. The NRC and Committee also reviewed relevant scientific literature regarding wolf population dynamics. A 2006 DNR Wildlife Division paper entitled "Review of Social and Biological Science Relevant to Wolf Management in Michigan" was particularly informative with regard to population dynamics and other related issues. The DNR presentation also confirmed that limiting harvest levels consistent with published research would not negatively impact population levels. In particular, the evidence weighs in favor of a conclusion that overall wolf abundance will not be reduced unless human-caused wolf mortality exceeds 30% of the total population. As a result, an appropriately limited harvest of wolves will not change the overall size or trajectory of the Michigan wolf population.

11. As with other states that have authorized the public hunting of wolves, we believe that any target harvest level for a first hunt should be conservative. As we gain experience with public wolf hunting in Michigan and learn more from other states about their respective experiences, we will gather better and more precise information on our wolf population. We believe that our recommendation will lead to a pragmatic and flexible program for managing wolves that recognizes the wide range of values people have for wolves. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation has served to protect, enhance, reestablish, and assure sustainability for a great many species in this country. Scientific wildlife management is a cornerstone of the model, and managing wolves consistent with these principles will ultimately benefit the species.
12. In arriving at this recommendation, the NRC has considered the *Michigan Wolf Management Plan*. However, the NRC notes that the current management plan was developed at a time when Michigan wolves were protected under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Thus, the DNR, upon an authorization of a public hunt by the NRC, would need to update its management plan with respect to wolves. The NRC recommends this effort proceed promptly after any approval of a public hunt.
13. The NRC and the Committee engaged in a thorough review and discussion with respect to the question of whether the NRC should authorize a public hunt of wolves. The NRC and Committee have received and considered substantial public comment. The Committee also received and considered presentations from recognized experts (some of which support and some of which oppose a public hunt), and reviewed extensive scientific information pertaining to the potential public wolf hunt. The NRC has given due consideration to the Staff Recommendation, and has reviewed the specific language of proposed Wildlife Conservation Order Amendments 13 and 14 of 2013.
14. Based upon all of the foregoing, the NRC finds that there exists a sustainable population of wolves in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Population monitoring has shown steady growth since 1989, with a current minimum population estimate of 658. The NRC also finds that the recommended target harvest would not adversely affect the overall population of wolves in Michigan, because human-caused wolf mortality is expected to remain below 30% of the total population.
15. Further, the NRC concludes that designating the wolf as a game species and authorizing a public wolf hunting season would be consistent with principles of sound scientific wildlife management, and therefore would be in the public interest. In reaching this conclusion, the NRC recognizes a number of benefits from a public hunt. As identified by the DNR, a public hunt can address conflict issues such as potential wolf-human conflicts and wolf depredation of domestic animals. A public hunt can also help provide a self-sustaining and healthy population of wolves, consistent with accepted population science and biology with respect to the species. A public hunt would also provide an opportunity for sportsmen and trappers to be further involved in Michigan's important hunting and fishing heritage, thereby providing benefits with respect to tourism and recreation, and would provide the DNR with additional license revenue to support critical and ongoing research to monitor Michigan's wolf population.
16. Based upon the foregoing, the NRC concludes that Wildlife Conservation Order Amendments 13 and 14 of 2013 are reasonable, appropriate, and consistent with sound science, and should be adopted.