

# Montana, Idaho consider increased wolf hunt quotas

May 8 2010, By MATTHEW BROWN , Associated Press Writer

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(AP) -- Hunters in Montana would be allowed to kill nearly three times as many gray wolves this fall compared with last year's inaugural hunt, under a proposal announced Friday by state wildlife officials.

Wolves in neighboring Idaho also face a potentially higher quota. And hunters there could be allowed to use traps, electronic calls and, in some regions, bait to increase their odds of a successful kill. Final details are pending.

The moves to put more wolves into hunters' crosshairs come barely a year after the predators came off the [endangered species list](#).

But a pending federal lawsuit could block the states' wolf seasons. Wolf advocates - including the Sierra Club and Defenders of Wildlife - argue the hunts would be too aggressive, threatening the species' long-term survival.

Ranchers counter that mounting livestock losses to wolves must be put in check through any available means, including hunting. State wildlife officials say last year's seasons proved the animals can withstand significant hunting pressure without collapsing.

Montana wildlife managers are asking the state's Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission to approve a quota between 186 and 216 wolves for the fall hunting season. During the 2009 hunt, 72 wolves were killed; the quota was 75.

The commission will take up the proposal when it meets Thursday in Helena. A final decision is expected in July following a public comment period.

Montana Chief of Wildlife Ken McDonald says the changes would target wolves in parts of the state where the predators have menaced livestock producers and frustrated hunters. Wolves regularly attack sheep and cattle, while big game species like elk and deer are a mainstay of their diet.

"We've learned a lot over the past year," McDonald said. "It's our responsibility to address the fact that more than 200 sheep and about 100 head of cattle were killed by wolves last year and that wolves have depressed deer and elk populations in some areas."

An archery-only wolf season also would be introduced. Stricter quota limits would be enforced for some backcountry areas, to concentrate hunting in areas where livestock attacks are more frequent.

Last year was the first time the animals had been subject to an organized public hunt in the Lower 48 states since they were nearly exterminated in the 1930s.

Hunting never stopped in Alaska, where wolf numbers never dipped to unsustainable levels. Wyoming briefly allowed the animals to be shot on sight two years ago, but the 320 wolves there have since been returned to the endangered species list.

There were at least 525 wolves in Montana last year. The number across the Northern Rockies - 1,706 - is still growing, though at its slowest rate in nearly 15 years.

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission meets in August to set the quota,

season dates and other groundrules for the state's 2010 hunt.

Jim Unsworth, Idaho Fish and Game deputy director, said the commission's objective is to lower the population to about 520 wolves, a number in line with the state's management goals.

At the end of 2009, Idaho had at least 843 wolves.

The agency is also considering allowing hunters to obtain more than one wolf permit, especially in some zones where wolves are impacting elk herds.

Idaho's first hunt ended in March with hunters bagging 185 [wolves](#), short of the quota of 220. Biologists credited the hunt with stabilizing a species that had been growing at a rate of 20 percent annually.

Environmental groups also tried to block last year's hunts, but their request for an injunction was turned down.

The lawsuit remains pending, and the groups are scheduled to press their case again during a June 15 hearing before U.S. District Judge Donald Molloy in Missoula.

"It's no surprise to us that Montana and Idaho are trying to up the hunt levels," said Doug Honnold with Earthjustice, the plaintiff's lead attorney. "We're going to do everything in our power to pursue the litigation and try to stop the hunts." ---

Associated Press writer Todd Dvorak in Boise, Idaho, contributed to this story.

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