

# Increasing the wolf harvest

**T**he recovery of wolves is one of Montana's great conservation achievements. It's been so successful, in fact, that the state's wolf population is now too large. It's out of balance with the number of prey animals and beyond a level many livestock producers will tolerate. New regulations approved by the FWP Commission in midsummer should help bring Montana's wolf numbers down to a more acceptable level.

At the end of 2011, this state was home to at least 653 wolves (and likely 10 to 30 percent more). That's a far higher number than many Montanans will accept and more than some prey populations can withstand. Last year we tried to cut the population to around 425. Unfortunately, regulations that included a five-month hunting season didn't achieve that goal. So this year the commission added a few other tools identified in Montana's wolf plan, the document that guides the state's wolf conservation and management.

One new management tool added this year is highly regulated trapping. To take a wolf with a trap, a trapper must complete a certification class and hold a Montana trapper's license. Wolf trappers can use foothold traps only—no snares or body-gripping Conibear traps. They must check their traps every 48 hours. To further reduce the odds of the unlikely event of capturing domestic animals, the traps must be set back 1,000 feet from trailheads and 150 feet from roads.

The new mandatory wolf trapping certification classes cover topics such as the history of wolves and wolf management, the role of trapping in conservation, trapping techniques and ethics, trapping regulations, harvest reporting, proper pelt care, and pelt registration requirements.

Another change for this year has been to

increase the season. It now runs from September 1 to February 28. The commission also increased the bag limit to three wolves. A person may take up to three wolves—one wolf by hunting and two wolves by trapping, or three wolves by trapping only. This will increase the probability of increasing the statewide wolf harvest.

Our aim is for the new regulations and other factors to reduce Montana's wolf pop-

healthy wolf population that contains ample genetic diversity. At the same time, numbers will be low enough to substantially reduce predation on livestock and big game like deer and elk.

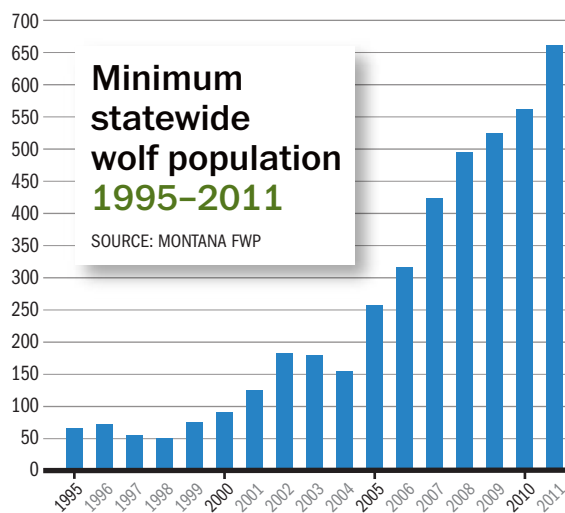
FWP remains committed to maintaining a healthy wolf population. Our job—in fact, our legal responsibility mandated by the state—is to manage all wildlife populations in Montana. That means working to achieve a balance by restoring populations that need help and controlling others when necessary. Some wolf control is required each year, but not so much as to ever threaten the overall health of the population. Our long-stated goal is to treat wolves like all other big game animals—elk, deer, moose, mountain lions, black bears, and other species thriving under regulated harvest seasons.

This department understands the concerns of the many hunters and ranchers frustrated that wolves are taking too big a bite out of some wildlife populations and livestock operations. That's the main reason we've become more aggressive about harvest methods.

Yet we also understand the concerns of those worried that the new harvest rules could allow hunters and trappers to kill too many wolves and threaten the population's viability. We have safeguards in place to ensure that won't happen.

Wolf management remains a relatively new endeavor in Montana. That's why you might want to question those who act as if they have all the answers. They don't. All of us—in FWP and out—are still figuring out wolf population dynamics, predator effects on prey populations, the effectiveness of various harvest techniques, and more. Remember, this is only Montana's third wolf season. We still have much to learn about these large carnivores.

—**Joe Maurier**, Montana FWP Director



**Our aim is for the new regulations and other factors to reduce Montana's wolf population by year's end.**

ulation by year's end. The other factors include likely wolf mortality from livestock depredation control, vehicle collisions, other accidents, and natural causes.

Even with this year's anticipated harvest increase, Montana will still be home to a