

**To the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and
Fisheries**

**Field Hearing: How Many Wolves are Enough? Examining the Need to
Delist the Gray Wolf**

Presented by:

Nathan Nelson

**State Representative of District 11b, Minnesota House of
Representatives**

Wolves in Minnesota:

Wolves have been a part of Minnesota's ecosystem since its founding as a state, and their existence extends long before the state's creation. Throughout Minnesota's history, the wolf population has varied, and has been relatively stable over the last three decades.

In recent history, the territory of Minnesota wolves has been concentrated in the northern third of the state, with expansion south and west becoming increasingly common. For the farming and ranching communities, this expansion has created an increased number of interactions with humans and livestock, necessitating a greater need for management of the wolf for both safety and economic reasons.

According to the most recent Minnesota Department of Natural Resources Wolf Population Update conducted in 2023, the state estimated that the 2022-2023 mid-winter wolf population was 2,919 wolves. This number is significantly higher than the minimum number of wolves needed for the population to be determined healthy, which is 1,600 wolves within the state.

Although historically believed to be sensitive to higher human population density, recent data from 1988-2018 indicates that the modern wolf population has developed an increased tolerance to humans and roadways.

This increased tolerance has also led to more negative interactions, making it harder to mitigate the risk to livestock and pets. As wolves become more comfortable with humans, they have learned to change their behavior, making them effective livestock predators regardless of human population density.

Wolf Affects to Farmers and Ranchers:

As a cattle producer myself, I can attest to the impact of wolves on my family's farm. We raise cattle at the intersection of forested and agricultural lands, where wolf habitat meets directly with prime grazing lands for livestock coupled with quality ground for row crops to grow feed. This habitat dynamic puts increased pressure on my cattle, and I have personally dealt with wolf kills for nearly two decades. The loss of cattle is difficult to bear and creates a significant monetary loss for my farm. This firsthand experience has convinced me of the need for more options when it comes to managing wolves in Minnesota.

As the wolf population and territory has increased and expanded, this has caused serious management issues for my farm, with annual losses to wolf depredation

becoming a normal occurrence. Beyond the economic repercussions of these losses, there also comes a psychological and emotional toll. Wolf killings on livestock can be devastating events, and the only recourse is through Minnesota's wolf depredation compensation program. In addition, verified wolf kills may also warrant the services of a certified trapper from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS).

Both programs are used extensively in Minnesota, with a need for more investment at both the state and federal levels. As a livestock producer, I would prefer having the tools in place to properly manage the wolf population on the front end, creating less of a need for recourse after an incident with my livestock. In addition, not all incidents are able to be recorded, leaving producers like me with no recourse at all. When producers like me are unable to prove and record loss of livestock to wolves, it puts us in a difficult position, knowing that we will no longer receive any compensation for the investment we have made into our livestock operations while also realizing that the predator which caused the harm will not be properly managed and left to act again.

Although wolves play a role in the ecosystem of Minnesota, there is a need for management of these animals that goes well beyond the current tools available to the citizens of Minnesota and the Federal and State governments.

The Need for More Management Tools

According to data published by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 142 wolves were trapped and euthanized by USDA APHIS trappers. This number is higher than all other states combined, highlighting how concentrated wolf populations have become.

The volume of wolf interactions with livestock is driving this statistic and speaks to the need for wolf management to return to the states. As wolves are currently federally protected, Minnesotans are left with no ability to properly manage the wolf population, forcing corrective action after negative situations have occurred.

I encourage lawmakers to consider this data in their deliberations and would point out that allowing states to manage their own wolf populations does create a detriment to wolves. It simply allows for professionals in the wildlife biology and agricultural industries to properly control these populations for the benefit of humans, wildlife, and domesticated livestock.

In these deliberations, lawmakers should take care to include the appropriate industry, government, and academic partners to ensure the necessary options are available to manage wolves.

These options could include the use of traps and snares, the re-creation of a hunting and trapping season, and more investment in calculating and tracking wolf populations and territories. Additionally, resources created at the state level in Minnesota also highlight a healthy investment in attempting to mitigate wolf interactions. The state of Minnesota currently has the Wolf-Livestock Conflict Prevention Grant program, helping producers to receive funding to help mitigate wolf interactions on their farms. This is an example of attempting to alleviate the issue before a negative situation arises.

The more data that is available will allow Minnesotans the ability to have a true understanding of the scope of wolves in our state and guide our leaders in their ability to provide the appropriate resources to maintain a healthy and properly managed wolf population.

In the current situation, where wolves are not allowed to be managed except in specific instances, we are left in a reactionary state, unable to handle the situation that individuals like me are experiencing every day in our communities.

Conclusion:

Across the state of Minnesota, citizens are discussing the role wolves play in our ecological process. Although wolves are an important predator species, wildlife biology requires balance to maintain quality habitat and healthy populations of a variety of species.

In the farming and ranching community, the consistent concern wolf interactions create with livestock creates a great deal of emotional and economic stress, putting livestock producers in a no-win situation with no end in sight.

I encourage the Natural Resources Subcommittee on Water, Wildlife, and Fisheries to continue engaging in this very important topic and would ask that Congress pass legislation removing the federal protections wolves currently receive to allow states to play their part in managing this predatory species.

Without proper management options, the wolf population in Minnesota and across the country will only continue to grow to unmanageable levels, creating more harm to livestock producers and the communities within the wolf range.

Representative Nathan Nelson