

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:
APPROPRIATIONS
COMMERCE
HEALTH, EDUCATION,
LABOR, AND PENSIONS

November 19, 2021

The Honorable Deborah Haaland
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St., NW – 6156
Washington, D.C. 20240

The Honorable Tom Vilsack
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Haaland and Secretary Vilsack:

Wisconsin and other Upper Great Lakes states have accomplished a remarkable goal over the last few decades: through the careful work and dedication from wildlife professionals, tribes, land managers and sportsmen, the gray wolf has returned to our landscape and has been brought back from near extinction in the region. This is an incredible story of enormous patience, stewardship, and commitment to shared values of maintaining healthy ecosystems and the natural heritage that so many have been privileged to experience in our region.

Now, ten months following the delisting of gray wolves, we have early information on the challenges and opportunities for public stewardship of the wolf population in our state. Despite what can often be strong disagreements among people over specifics of wolf policy, one area where many Wisconsinites can find agreement is a desire to maintain viable wolf populations in a way that avoids the need for re-listing. Accomplishing this will take an ongoing effort to balance the successful recovery of wolves with the concerns and needs of people in wolf country. Based on my conversations with constituents on all sides of this issue, I believe Wisconsin can successfully strike that balance if stakeholders have confidence in a science-based management process. I encourage your agencies to make resources available to support the state's efforts to maintain up-to-date population science and to reduce the potential for conflicts between wolves and our farmers and communities.

Following the removal of the Upper Great Lakes population of the gray wolf from the Endangered Species List in January 2021, the wolf population in Wisconsin experienced a significant decline due to a hunting season immediately following delisting that was mandated by state law and administered by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Given that the Upper Great Lakes states are one of just a few areas of the country that have accomplished the recovery of wolf populations, the successful transition from federal management to a stable, healthy state-managed population is extremely important. As you know well, the work of recovering a species does not end with the removal of an endangered designation, and likewise,

the science and management that lead to species recovery should be expected to evolve as the population changes.

Despite the best efforts of state wildlife managers to meet their new responsibilities for wolves, Wisconsin's wolf management program is still based on an outdated 1999 wolf management plan and on a newly adopted population survey methodology that is still being calibrated. Given these limitations, wildlife managers do not have the tools to establish a science-based structure for a wolf hunt based on accurate information about where wolf packs are and how the February hunt impacted the population. This goes against the basic goals of public natural resources management. We should be making sure that any member of the public—whatever their perspective on wolf management—can be certain that decisions about this animal and human impacts on it are made using sound science.

There's no doubt that there are a wide range of perspectives and strong opinions on wolf management among the Wisconsin public. Polarized positions strain the ability of stakeholders to find common ground, and limit the options for management that reflects the diversity of perspectives and values on this issue. Proceeding without solid science makes it even harder.

I urge you to make federal resources available to assist in ensuring high-quality science is available to wildlife managers, state-level decision makers, tribal governments, researchers, and the public. These resources should help to advance the science on wolf biology, update information on human-wolf interactions and utilize high-quality population assessment tools. They should also provide information that can assist with the development and effective use of management plans that reflect the range of values that people in Wisconsin hold for wolves in our region.

Wisconsin has a deep history of hunting and fishing for food, and with it, a deep tradition of sportsmanship defined by respect for nature, our state's remarkable resources and others who feed their families from the land. Those who have continued hunting, fishing and trapping traditions to provide for their families carry this ethic forward by teaching the next generation to use methods that minimize the suffering of the animal and to utilize as much of it as possible.

These ethics have guided our elected leaders, including sportsmen and women who are elected by their peers to serve fellow hunters, trappers, and fishers on panels that help set state natural resources policy. Over the years, these panels have focused on setting game seasons that strategically manage population health based on reproductive cycles, variations in sub-regions within the state, and the biological characteristics of the species. We have also found ways for the residents of the state to respect differences in fish and game management programs; including both those managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and those managed by tribes based on treaty rights and rooted in respect for tribal sovereignty and values.

Both of your agencies oversee the management of federal public lands in Wisconsin that are home to wolves. These large tracts of public land provide particularly good wolf habitat and help to reduce human-wolf conflict by preserving areas of quality habitat away from farms and communities. The varied landscapes and uses of federal public lands in Wisconsin have long

demanded that managers work with stakeholders to find a way to balance different management goals.

As the state and stakeholders work through wolf management decisions, I encourage you to provide your staff in Wisconsin with the resources and tools to be ready and constructive partners in the conversation about wolf management in and near federal public lands. Much of our national forest land exists in some sort of a patchwork of land ownership, with private, county, state and tribal lands nearby. This requires co-management strategies that can help reduce conflicts and support public trust in state-level management of the gray wolf. I am a firm believer that successful long-term management of federal public lands depends on a transparent and regular dialog between public land managers and local stakeholders, and that is especially critical on this matter.

Wisconsin Ojibwe tribes hold wolves sacred and core to their culture and identity. These and other tribes have done a great deal to restore the wolf population, especially in our northern forests. Their beliefs and commitment deserve our respect and courtesy, but beyond this, several tribes hold federal treaty rights that depend on a healthy environment and ecosystem. This includes not only a healthy, stable wolf population, but the ecological benefits and cultural significance wolves provide. These rights are not subject to debate—they have been in place for well over a century and have been solidified in court cases. Unfortunately, recent public debates on wolf management have disregarded and, disturbingly, suggested circumventing these rights.

Despite the recent controversy, tension and litigation related to wolf management, I have great faith in the practical sense and commitment of Wisconsinites to find common ground, even on challenging issues. Common ground certainly doesn't mean everyone will get exactly what they want, but despite the conflict, I remain hopeful that our state can find a way to move past this tumultuous moment and resume the pragmatic and thoughtful decision-making we have utilized throughout our history. To this end, I encourage you to provide the state and stakeholders information on the resources available from the John S. McCain III National Center for Environmental Conflict Resolution.

Finally, I encourage you to utilize the resources under the jurisdiction of both the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture that are dedicated to addressing conflicts between predators and domesticated animals. As a member of the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee and Chair of the Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies, I have pressed for these funds to be available in order to address conflicts that may arise. I especially encourage you to provide the state, farmers and other stakeholders with information and resources on the tools that are available for proactively reducing the likelihood of depredation. It may also be useful for the public to have information on trends in depredation, in order to maintain an up-to-date understanding of these events and ways to reduce them.

Though wolf management in Wisconsin has become contentious, I hold hope that we can find a way forward that reflects this remarkable story of wildlife recovery and our state's natural

resources heritage. I urge you to make these federal resources available as our state works towards predictable, stable and ecologically-informed management of this remarkable species.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tammy Baldwin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "T".

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator