

2014 Furbearer Advisory Committee Summary Minutes

June 2–3, 2014

Days Inn Conference Room, Wausau, WI

DNR Committee Members in Attendance: John Olson, Chair, Wildlife Management (WM), Robert Rolley, Science Services (SS), Linda Olver, Customer Services & Licensing (CS&L), Chris Cole, WM, SOD, Jake Fries, WM, NED, Todd Naas, WM, NOD, Pat Beringer, WM, NOD, Brandon Stefanski, WM, WCD, Dave Walz, Law Enforcement (LE)

Invited Ojibwe Biological Advisor Committee Member in Attendance: Jonathan Gilbert, Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC)

Invited Committee Members in Attendance: David Ruid, USDA-APHIS-Wildlife Services (WS), Scott Anderson, U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Al Lobner, Hunters Rights Coalition, Jim Hanson, Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association, Patrick Quaintance, Wisconsin Wildlife Federation, Scott Zimmerman, Wisconsin Trappers Association, Ed Harvey, Wisconsin Conservation Congress

Meeting Facilitator: Scott Loomans, WM

Advisory Committee Assistant: Geriann Albers, WM

Invited Department Experts: Nathan Roberts, SS, Brian Dhuey, SS, Lindsey Long, WM

Invited University Researchers: Emily Latch, UW-Milwaukee, Tim Van Deelen, UW-Madison

Invited Federal Biologist: Brian Stemper, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Other Guests: Dan Carroll, WTA, Laurie Groskopf, Nick McCann, GLIFWC

June 2, 2014: Day 1 – Reports & Updates

Call to order at 9 am with introductions, agenda repair, and review of committee protocol.

Trapper Education Updates. Geriann Albers provided a brief update that included: Another record year for Trapper Education with approximately 2,200 graduates in 2013; Held 4 wolf trapper ed workshops in 2013 with 130 graduates with five workshops scheduled for this year; Will offer new instructor orientations at the WTA district level, with one completed and others scheduled for later this year; Developed several new webpages in 2013, including a trapper ed instructor page, furbearer page, wolf trapper ed page, trapper ed committee page, and furbearer committee page; Act 168 allows for students to receive a ½ credit for Trapper Education, so we've been working with Department of Public Instruction certified Ag teachers to incorporate Trapper Education into course curriculums with 29 teachers certified last June and another group to be trained this June; Printed a revised, second edition of the new Trapper Ed manual as well as created instructor guides with important forms, instructions, and new manual quiz answers; Welcomed a new WTA Statewide Trapper Education Coordinator, Bryce Larson; Recognition to Mike Widner, WTA statewide correspondence coordinator for handling extensive course workloads.

Wildlife Fur School Training. John Olson reported on the four workshops which included: Law Enforcement (18 participants), Northland College (24 students), UW-Stevens Point (30

students), Wildlife Fur School (28 participants). Five states (Oklahoma, North Dakota, Idaho, Minnesota, and Wisconsin) and several agencies attended Wildlife Fur School. We successfully trained just over 100 professionals and future professionals through fur school training. In 2014, plans are to coordinate and conduct five workshops, including UW-Madison. We're currently providing advice to states in two regions (NE and SE) on how to set up and conduct such training programs.

National Conservation Need (NCN). John Olson reported that as chair of the Technical Working Group of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (AFWA), he assisted in applying for an NCN grant which was approved. Letters of Intent were then submitted detailing how the approximately \$250,000 will be used to conduct a trap ownership and use survey, a state agency survey, and outreach efforts. Importance is to document the shift to humane trap systems in preparation for 2016 when we address the European Union regarding such matters. Funding begins in 2015, for a two year period and Wisconsin will assist directly by administering the outreach component of this national effort. This effort will include "Trapping Matters" courses throughout the U.S, which will inform, update, and encourage state agency personnel on the need for regulated trapping, the tools available, and other aspects of modern, regulated trapping, in addition to one pilot regional Fur School, most likely in New York state.

WTA update. Scott Zimmerman reported that things are going well and membership is strong. The Fall Rendezvous is scheduled for September 5–7, the weekend after Labor Day. The summer district rendezvous season has just begun. The Trapper Ed program is strong with several dedicated, committed instructors. Fur Takers of America (FTA) would like to have 50th anniversary rendezvous here, but unsure what year they started, so trying to determine. Michigan Trappers have requested WTA assistance at National Trappers Association Rendezvous in Escanaba, July 24–27.

Trap Incident Update. Geriann Albers presented graphs showing the high number of incidences in 2013, however no dog deaths in traps.

WS Beaver Control Update. Dave Ruid provided summary tables and a detailed explanation of their control work in 2013. The WS beaver control program began in 1988 with the major partner being WDNR Bureau of Fisheries and to a smaller extent Wildlife Management, interested towns, GLIFWC and the USFS. Work includes the removal of 1,267 beaver and 1,000 to 1,200 beaver dams in 2013 (150–200 removed with explosives). Although otter avoidance is practiced they accounted for 79 incidental otters, or 1 otter per 16 beaver taken, slightly lower than previous years. Records suggest that it takes on average 7 trap nights before an incidental otter is caught, with more males taken than females. 2013 was an anomaly with the late winter, reducing efforts in April, normally a big month for activities. Most otter are caught while doing trout stream protection work with a majority of incidental otter caught in body grips, a few in footholds, and none in snares. In 2013, eighteen counties asked for WS control work while the 1,500 miles of trout streams managed have been consistent over the years. Wildlife Services trappers are instructed to use the most current techniques available to avoid otter. They also have a policy that if the season is open and a citizen trapper has interest, WS trappers will pull their traps and leave the area. Signs are also posted so trappers or others can contact them.

US Fish & Wildlife Service, Upper Mississippi Refuge Update. Brian Stemper provided information on the Upper Mississippi refuge system. This work unit includes four states, is 261 miles long, and includes 240,000 acres, with a District office in each of the four states. Created in 1924, they've had regulated trapping since the late 1920's. The "Upper Miss" is managed through access permits, not an auction system. Although there's no limit on the number of

trappers there is a limit on traps used (40) which must exhibit a special tag. They issue 350–400 permits (approximately ½ of all permits are for Wisconsin trappers), with a majority of trappers concentrating on muskrats. The recent furbearer management plan (2007) supports regulated trapping and they try to follow state regulations and seasons when possible. Changes in otter populations and differences in state management are a challenge, but have a conservative harvest of 1 otter per trapper. In Wisconsin, trappers must have the proper permit and follow the state regulations on otter. The Service is concerned about user conflicts and has tried to manage seasons and use areas to minimize potential conflicts. Issues between users of decades ago have diminished, being replaced with concerns over the current muskrat population, the lowest since the 1950s. Reoccurring floods, sedimentation, habitat loss, and concerns over overharvest and avian predators are topics of interest in muskrat management. The Service also reports an increase in beaver problems and damage to islands, possibly due to a late opener (after state duck hunting season), longer waterfowl seasons, and no open water harvest opportunity.

Furbearer Survey Update. Brian Dhuey, SS, reports that furbearers as a group are the most surveyed species we have in the state. All regular surveys are available on the web at keyword: “furbearer reports”. Deer hunter wildlife survey, which documents furbearers, started in 2009 as a voluntary report, but this past fall they mailed the survey to 17,000 deer hunters (~250/county) with a great response that increased sample size by 5 fold. The new e-registration system will be in place in 2016, but will have e-registration in 2015. Furbearers don’t necessarily fit well into a deer e-registration system, but hopefully we’ll have a more hunter-interactive system that will streamline the process. Another research challenge is DMUs which went from a road/river-based to county-based system. However, many furbearer species are collected at the DMU scale to document finer-scale catch per unit effort changes over time. Units are still in code, and recommend we continue to collect at that level. A recent Great Lakes Protection grant for lower Green Bay and Fox River area will measure trapper effort and compare to other parts of Brown County. Initial results suggest no difference in issues with species of concern or differences in effort inside vs. outside protection zone. Most changes within the area of concern seem to be habitat based and not contaminant based, identifying phragmites as a potential problem for muskrat populations.

Carcass Collections Update. Robert Rolley, SS, reports that in 2013 our carcass collections included 151 bobcats and 622 fisher skulls statewide. Otter carcass collections are done every 3 years, with 2012–2013 an otter collection year, so will repeat in 2015–2016. In 2014–2015, we will collect bobcat carcasses and fisher skulls statewide. Collecting fisher skulls statewide annually was a recommendation from the furbearer survey review committee to start building a dataset for age-at-harvest model for fisher. Whole carcass collections of bobcat are important for sex and age-specific reproduction which can document year to year variation in age-specific reproduction. Fisher have much less variation in evidence of reproduction which is why only skulls are recommended for collection. We collected digestive tracts from bobcats and are offering samples to undergraduate or vet school students that may have interest. As in the past, we returned all skulls requested. This totaled 196 (130 fisher and 66 bobcat skulls).* The total cost for fisher/bobcat skulls (including supplies, shipping and labor) was \$1,068.59*. (*Note: General information about returns was provided at the meeting, but exact numbers were added after the meeting to better represent numbers and costs involved. These exact numbers were not presented at the meeting). If this becomes cost prohibitive, we may need to look for alternatives in the collection of teeth such as turning in just the lower jaw. Age data from last year won’t be back till next March or so.

Tribal Management and Research Update. Jonathan Gilbert assisted in the collection of tribal bobcat carcasses, now an important part of the overall harvest. Research efforts include a collaborative fisher diet study in northern zones using stable isotope analysis. Project includes GLIFWC, UW-Madison and the DNR with roughly 100 samples collected this past harvest season. Dr. Pauli's lab will perform the analysis similar to work being completed on martens and black bears. Current marten investigations include a PhD candidate working on marten distribution and dispersal through Iron County. A Masters project is being completed on the reintroduction into the Chequamegon and their contribution to the population. Study is based on genetic work and habitat modelling which will be repeated on the Nicolet portion next winter.

Marten Update. The marten committee has developed forest management guidelines for the American marten with recommendations on timber sale modifications that will assure habitat structure in addition to ways to improve sites for marten. Management recommendations should be out soon and may eventually be incorporated into state and MFL-certified land management plans.

Badger Genetics Research. Dr. Emily Latch, UW-Milwaukee, began a research project in 2009 to evaluate distribution and genetic health of the Wisconsin badger population. A PhD student used sightings and genetic samples as key items in the overall study. They recorded 452 confirmed sightings from 2009 to 2014. Badgers appear widespread and when combined with mammal surveys from 1987–1998, badgers have been documented in every county in Wisconsin. The genetics work had three primary aspects: genetic diversity, landscape impacts to gene flow, and comparisons to other populations in North America. With hair snares from active burrows and road kills they had samples from 233 badgers with identifiable genetics, showing high genetic diversity. Badgers also had high gene flow throughout the state with no evidence of barriers, but geographic variation was documented. Agriculture influenced gene flow, which likely meant badgers move through agricultural areas instead of avoiding or settling in such areas. A comparison to other North American badgers occurred by using state-supplied samples and North American Fur Auctions, Inc. specimens with over 1,000 badger samples collected. Wisconsin is genetically different than the west and the lower peninsula of Michigan but related more to western badgers with some intermediary relationship to Michigan genetics. Wisconsin's badger population has comparable levels of genetic variation like the more widespread western populations. The effective population size is a genetic measure of the number of individuals that contribute genes to the next generation, not a population estimate. This study suggests an effective population size of 474 in Wisconsin compared to Michigan of 100, Iowa of 436, North Dakota of 3,329, South Dakota of 1,689, and Montana of 689, which all have regulated harvest.

Badger Life History Research Update. Dr. Tim Van Deelen, UW-Madison suggests that badgers, protected in Wisconsin since 1958, are poorly understood across most of their range with few studies conducted despite a large distribution. Badgers, besides being a predator of nests, also eat ground squirrels, which are known nest predators. Objectives of the study were to evaluate habitat use and resource selection (home range size, habitat use), demographic parameters (survival, reproduction), and understand ecological role (apex predators, burrow use by other species). Study area was in southwestern Wisconsin (Dane, Iowa, Lafayette, Green counties) with foothold trapping occurring in spring to early summer to conduct a telemetry study. They caught 20 individuals, (13 males, 7 females) and radio-equipped 16, (14 male, 6 female). Surgically implanted transmitters seemed to go well with recaptures healed and documented weight gain. One male lost its transmitter after 8 months, possibly from fights with other badgers. It was difficult to locate badgers, partially because of their fossorial nature and sometimes because of antenna problems. They estimated home range polygons by triangulation

of known locations. Additionally, they collected carcasses which provided reproductive tracts, teeth, stomachs, etc. Home range size varied from 0.5 to 30 square kilometers and habitat selection of burrows showed a positive relationship with slope and southwest aspect, while a negative relationship with depth to bedrock. Badgers prefer to burrow on southwest facing slopes and steeper slopes, away from water. Home ranges were situated non-randomly on the landscape, so there was some selectivity, with grass having the highest ranking, followed by crops, development, and trees, in that order. When they viewed animal locations compared to home range, it was still non-random but with more variation showing a selection for grass, trees, crops, and development, respectively. Some individual badgers use more forested areas, some more crops or grassland areas. Badger scats and carcasses are being collected, with plans to complete the study later this year.

Northern Badger Citizen Science Proposal. Northern Wisconsin is the home to numerous badgers located in forested habitats with a preference for lighter soils. Retired high school biology teacher, Bruce Prentice, had conducted a long-term black bear project with high school students and now is interested in a multi-school badger project in northern Bayfield County. Todd Naas, who described this effort, is working with and mentoring Mr. Prentice on his proposal. The committee members recommended looking into hair snares, microchips, and trail cameras as a means of monitoring.

BMP Updates. John Olson reported that Best Management Practices (BMPs) for Trapping research has been ongoing since 1997. With completion of the Wolf BMP we will have published humane trap research efforts for all furbearer species in the lower 48 states. The two remaining North American species to research are arctic fox and wolverine, with trap research to occur in Alaska, 2014–2015. With Canadian cooperation we now have eight traps in the Wolf BMP. We're about half complete with the MB 650 cast jaw foothold with aid of WS personnel in MN and WI. This trap research is the largest wildlife research effort of any kind undertaken in North America in our history. All 50 states support the work and 43 have conducted some part of the research effort. Based on the Agreed Minute with the European Union (EU) we have a deadline of 2016 to complete an initial BMP research on all furbearers. Russia recently filed a derogation from their contract with EU over wolves in Siberia, identifying the need to test additional tools over the next 5 years. Due to issues in Brussels in 2013, the U.S. continues to work with the EU, keeping the “doors open” on the wild fur trade. However, the 2016 deadline is the primary focus of our efforts. Wisconsin DNR and WTA have been key participants in this national effort since it began in 1997.

Beaver Management Plan Update. John Olson reports that efforts have been ongoing since 2011 with a final draft recently sent to the Beaver Task Force to review. Once all edits and maps are incorporated, the final version will go back out to Task Force. After their final review we will submit the plan to the Wildlife Policy Team for review and recommendations on additional steps prior to submission to the Natural Resources Board.

North American Furbearer Workshop Report. Jake Fries reported on the North American Furbearer Workshop held in southeastern Ohio this spring. Furbearer biologists and researchers from Northeastern, Southeastern and Midwestern states attended with key discussions on regional muskrat population declines. Pennsylvania is proposing a northeastern regional research effort using PR funds. Coyote predation is another new research topic in many states, likely driven by impacts on deer. Disease concerns, especially in the southeast, focus on the relocation of rabies vectors (like raccoons), especially in relation to hound dog enclosures (coursing pens) and rehab situations. Fisher declines throughout their range were also a

discussion item. North Dakota is starting to see some fisher, which isn't typical range for them. Another interesting point was Minnesota's trapper survey found that 60% of those trappers surveyed had heard of BMPs, with 10% using BMPs on their trap lines. So that leads to the question of how do we implement and educate about this large-scale research. CITES approval for black bears, especially in the northeast where there are ties to Canada, was another discussion topic. North Dakota does seem to be having issues with kill snaring that they are trying to address, possibly directing educational materials toward those that use kill snares.

CITES Update. John Olson briefed the committee on CITES. For wolves, only one state has CITES approval (Alaska). As of May 27, the Service announced by the end of June it would allow states to begin to apply for CITES authority. Black bear being listed as a CITES animal was also discussed again. Researchers and harvesters are having trouble sending samples/pelts to Canada because of lack of CITES authority. AFWA initiated a survey of states to document interest in CITES black bear authority and although interest was small, there is interest and AFWA is taking the lead for the states.

Furbearer Health Update. Lindsey Long reported that last year we had two outbreaks of distemper, mostly in the Spooner area, with additional evidence of outbreaks this year. Pennsylvania picked up raccoon rabies, suspected from the movement of raccoons from southern states. Muskrat populations have been of concern and the Health Team is interested in looking to see if there is a disease component. Have asked for muskrats to be turned in if there are concerns, but need fur on and recently dead. Also interested in any fisher or marten found dead so those can be necropsied. Have looked at virus exposure in fisher in the past (canine parvovirus, distemper, and some feline viruses). Have noticed exposure, but aren't sure of the effects and infection rates. Interested in looking at those further, but need funding. California experienced an increase in fisher deaths from rodenticide related to illegal marijuana farms. Will be looking at heavy metal contaminants near Sheboygan River in mink. Archived fisher serology samples are being re-run through USDA to look at potentially new pathogens and how long we can pick up disease antibodies on Nobuto strips.

Horicon Marsh Fur Farm Update. Chris Cole reported on the Horicon Fur Farm which began in the 1930's as a state-run facility. Annually, based on conditions, marsh units are auctioned off for water trapping rights. Under this system they have flexibility in season lengths and species targeted, allows dike control, and provides unique trapping opportunity. Between the state portion and the federal portion there's normally 24 units available, that range from 200 acres to 2,000 acres in size. Also have an under-utilized youth/disabled unit. In 2008, good water conditions resulted in high muskrat numbers. In 2012 a drought knocked them back which was followed by two hard winters and low water levels, at times freezing to bottom. Although water levels have improved this year, they may close some units. Intense, micro-management in the past may be replaced, allowing for more annual uniformity. Upland permits are free to encourage predator management. Beaver populations seem to have increased, so have allowed a harvest of two beaver per unit on the state portion. Otter harvest is allowed if a trapper has a state permit, but with light pressure they may become an issue.

Public Comment. None.

Evening Program – Respectful Use of Trained Dogs. The 2014 evening presentations focused on the responsible and ethical use of trained dogs in the pursuit of furbearers. Presentations were given by Courtney Schaefer of the Versatile Hunting Dogs associations, Ericka Froeming of the Sporting Dogs Association, and David Schmidt of the Hound and Tree Dog Association.

June 3, 2014 – Rules & Recommendations

Call to order at 7:30 A.M., with introductions, agenda repair, and review of committee protocol.

New York Otter Avoidance Study. Nathan Roberts shared his experience in otter incidental avoidance while working in New York. New York Department of Environment and Conservation conducted an otter avoidance study and as a result, required specific triggers on 330 body grip traps in regions of the state where otter were first appearing. Trigger configuration was both wires pushed off to the side, tied together, cut to a length no greater than 6 ½ inches and used with a 2-way trigger compared to the more standard 4-way trigger. The study revealed a similar firing rate compared to standard triggers for beaver over 25 pounds, but allowed beaver kits to pass through. This technique would be useful in certain situations, especially with fur trappers who would rather not catch kits. When employed, it showed a dramatic reduction in the number of incidental otters, but did increase the rate of hip-caught beaver. With support of the Trapper Education Committee and the Wildlife Policy Team, the department will purchase a bulk order (roughly about \$1.80 each) and with a trifold brochure on their use, offer them for free at the WTA Rendezvous and other gatherings. This would be an incentive for trappers to work toward a reduction in incidental otter take and at the same time, easier management of their local beaver populations.

Furbearer Survey Review Committee Update. Nathan Roberts provided the background of this critical yet thorough look at the type of furbearer surveys being conducted. A sub-committee was charged with this task, and met a few times prior to a key position becoming vacant. Nathan will now lead this effort to assure that we're collecting good information or if there's other ways we can gather data with less expense and equal to or greater accuracy. Surveys of high interest include our winter track surveys, otter aerial and beaver helicopter surveys. The intent of this analysis isn't that we change immediately, but that we take a serious look at current efforts and make recommendations that would consider alternative tools. The timeline is to have a report before this committee in 2015 as that's where we need to make recommendations.

Fisher Management

Fisher Harvest Summary. Robert Rolley reviewed the 2014 harvest. The total quota in 2013 was 815 fisher with a tribal allocation of 130 and state quota of 685. State trappers took 623 with reported incidentals of 70. Off-reservation harvest was 104 and on-reservation was 14, for a total of 811. As in the past several years, higher harvest tended to be concentrated along the southern edge of our northern forests with significantly fewer in the far north. Three-fourths of fisher harvest is from private lands with 20% from public properties. Even though harvest was below quotas on most zones, we did exceed recommendations by a small amount in Fisher Zones D and F.

Committee discussed the larger fisher declines occurring in northern Wisconsin, as well as Michigan, Minnesota and New York. In Minnesota, a multi-year fisher/marten study is coming to a close with most information not published yet, but their situation suggests habitat, timber harvest techniques and predation may play into it, with an ultimate loss of critical denning sites. In Wisconsin, our prey base and timber harvest techniques are different, with little knowledge of the Upper Michigan or Upstate New York situations.

Fisher Population Analysis. Robert Rolley summarized as follows: Fairly even sex ratio in harvest so far; Success rates this past year were comparable. At zone level, saw success rates drop in A, B, C; Zone D bounced up a bit, and success has dropped the last several years in E and stayed steady in F; Winter track survey data was sparse in 2013–14 with only 8 routes completed out of 34, due to lack of good weather (i.e., above 0 degrees F for a minimum, no snowfall after 6 P.M., etc.). Transects run didn't show much for fisher presence in Zones A and B with no fisher on several routes. No routes were conducted in Zone C with three routes run in D with few fisher; Collected fisher carcasses statewide. Won't have age data back until next year, but have not seen much variation in harvest age structure over time; All of this new data is included into population models for Fisher Zones A–D where we have management goals and a long history of regulated harvest.

Fisher Zone A

Fisher Zone A model suggests a population of 1,800 with a management goal of 1,700. Harvest quota last year was 140, with a harvest of 120 (55 state and 65 tribal). Recommendation to consider a quota of 150 was the consensus of the committee.

Committee Recommendation: Fisher Zone A Harvest Quota of 150.

Fisher Zone B

Fisher Zone B model suggests a population of 2,000 with a goal of 3,200. Harvest quota last year was 100, with a harvest of 63 (34 state and 29 tribal). Population model suggests if we want to allow an increase, a quota of 100 or less is needed. Trends also suggest a review of the management goal may be of merit. A harvest quota of 75 was discussed, and consensus of the committee occurred.

Committee Recommendation: Fisher Zone B Harvest Quota of 75.

Fisher Zone C

Fisher Zone C model suggests a population of 1,200, with a goal 1,600. Harvest quota last year was 60, with a harvest of 46 (41 state and 5 tribal). A harvest quota of 60 was discussed, and consensus of the committee occurred.

Committee Recommendation: Fisher Zone C Harvest Quota of 60.

Fisher Zone D

Fisher Zone D model suggests a population of 1,700, with a goal of 2,700. Harvest quota last year was 50, with a harvest of 61 (59 state and 2 tribal). A harvest quota of 50–75 was suggested and consensus of the committee was a recommendation of 75.

Committee Recommendation: Fisher Zone D Harvest Quota of 75.

Fisher Zone E

Fisher Zone E has been managed via trends in success rates as a barometer of population status. Harvest quota last year was 225, with a harvest of 180 (no tribal take). With a drop in success rates and reports of a leveling off of observations, suggestions were made to stay close to last year's harvest. Harvest quotas of 215 and 225 were discussed, with a consensus of the committee at 220.

Committee Recommendation: Fisher Zone E Harvest Quota of 220.

Fisher Zone F

Fisher Zone F has been managed similar to Zone E with an increase in success rates continuing. Harvest quota last year was 240 with a harvest of 254 (no tribal take). Harvest quota suggestions of 240 to 250 were discussed. Regional representatives observed an increase in fishers and suggested a higher harvest. A consensus of the committee was for a harvest quota of 260.

Committee Recommendation: Fisher Zone F Harvest Quota of 260.

Otter Management

Otter Harvest Summary. Robert Rolley reported that last year the statewide quota was 1,200, which was shared with the tribes via an allocation of 135, with a final state quota of 1,065. The preliminary state harvest was 536 and the tribal preliminary harvest was 43. The incidental take of otters statewide was 220 with an on-reservation harvest of 18 for a grand total known mortality of 817. Almost two-thirds (63%) of otter were taken via access to private lands. Otter aerial surveys were conducted with 42 of 69 routes completed. There were 14 of 23 routes completed in north, with 16% of stream crossings with otter tracks which is lower than it was in early years, but similar to what was seen in 2008–2010. In the south, all 23 routes were completed with 2.6% of stream crossings with otter tracks, one of the lowest observations of otter tracks since we initiated the survey.

Otter Population Analysis. Typically we've seen a relatively steady level of males being 60% of the statewide harvest. Incidental otters continue to be significant, with about one-third coming from Wildlife Services and two-thirds from other sources. Statewide success rates declined below 20% compared to over 30% in 2011 with the largest declines in both north and central zones. Winter conditions most likely played a factor as could overall otter populations. Trends since aerial surveys began were presented using regression that weighs by number of surveys done, so years when more routes were completed have more weight than when few routes are completed. The analysis showed a decreasing trend in otter crossings in the north from levels we had in early 2000's, possibly starting to level off now. Over time we've documented a significant, 4% per year decline. The Central Zone has a greater decline of 10% per year over the same time span, while the South Zone showed no significant trend.

The opinions of beaver trappers on changes in otter abundance don't match trends from otter aerial surveys, with an increasing proportion of beaver trappers suggesting an otter population increase. Surveys suggest a stable trend in the central zone with a similar pattern in south with more beaver trappers suggesting otter were increasing, but proportion of trappers has been fairly stable. The consistency of trends was reviewed between harvest success rates, aerial surveys, and opinions of beaver trappers among the three zones with relatively little consistency in trend

between these three potential indices of abundance. With all surveys suggesting a different overall direction it becomes hard to make good, informed recommendations.

Ideally, it would be great if all trend indicators pointed the same direction, however different surveys aren't correlated with each other and we're not getting a consistent pattern. The carcass collections in 2012–2013 suggest age composition and pregnancy rates were similar to what we've seen earlier. Without a clear trend to use in calibrating the models, it's hard to know if the model is reflecting the population. The model suggests that with a reduced harvest, we were starting to see growth again, but with higher harvest levels the last few years, it's possibly slowing the growth or causing a slight decline. Otter management goal is 13,000 statewide and the model says we've been below that for a few years, but have been trying to grow the population. With low harvest this year, we've made some progress in increasing otters toward the goal however the model suggests a harvest in the 1,000 range would allow the population to grow whereas a harvest of 1,400 would keep things where they're at now.

Rough winter weather may have impacted the ability to trap, especially under deep snow and ice, causing the decrease in harvest. Suggestions were made for 1,300 to 1,400. A harvest of 1,300 would allow slow growth toward goal, whereas 1,400 would stabilize or slightly decrease. Because of need to show movement toward goal, 1,300 was the committee consensus. The division of the quota amongst the three zones was one-third to each last year. Group consensus was to recommend a 40% North, 30% Central, and 30% South split as it was for a number of years prior to last year.

Committee Recommendation: Otter Harvest Quota of 1,300 with a 40/30/30 split.

Bobcat Management

Bobcat Harvest Update. Robert Rolley reported that the quota last year was 240, (state 135, tribes 105), with the state portion split equally at 68 permits for each of the two time periods. The state bobcat harvest was 58 in the first time period and 65 in the second time period for a total of 123. This includes 116 registered in addition to 7 that were called-in, but no registration records yet received. The tribal off-reservation harvest was 46, on-reservation harvest of 6, and incidentals turned in were 42, for a total known mortality of 217. Unlike fisher (where 75% of the harvest came from private lands), 75% of the state bobcat harvest came from public lands. Over 80% of the harvest was taken by hunting with trained dogs. In period 1, 70% of the harvest was taken by hunting and 30% was taken by trapping. In the second period, 98% was taken by hunting and 2% by trapping. The central part of the harvest zone seems to contribute the majority of harvest. The tribal harvest decreased from the record-setting harvest of 2012–13.

Bobcat Southern Zone Rule Update. Scott Loomans reported on recent activities regarding this proposed expansion. The Assembly committee requested modifications to have a statewide harvest, and like wolves, allow zone switching for harvesters. The Natural Resources Board declined to make these modifications. But it was a good process, since cleaning up loose ends is their role in the process. The final 30-day review period of the second legislative committee ends in early June, possibly as we meet. The joint committee for review of rules took no action, so if all goes well, from this point on, we will have the southern bobcat zone opened this fall. A quota recommendation is up to this committee, but there is now the option to consider a regulated harvest in the southern portion of the state.

There was concern and dismay expressed by committee members that the recommended proposal from the Furbearer Committee in 2013 was not what came out in the final rule.

Bobcat Application Update. Linda Olver provided the details of the revised application process that now includes the southern zone, (with the same two time periods), in the licensing system. This change was implemented on May 8, 2014 in an effort to reduce confusion later on. The approximately 7,200 applicants who applied prior to May 8 will be informed of the new zone and provided options if they chose to change their application prior to the August 1 deadline.

Bobcat Southern Zone Habitat Review. Robert Rolley reported that Wildlife Research has completed an initial habitat suitability assessment using recent research from grad students under the tutelage of Dr. Eric Anderson of UW-Stevens Point. Leslie Adams used habitat use data from research in northern Wisconsin by Matt Lovallo and Jonathan Gilbert to develop a preliminary suitability model for all of northern Wisconsin. John Clare's recent work at UW-Stevens Point involved a large study area in the central forest and with telemetry and trail cameras further identified suitable habitat in this region. Population estimates for this study area south of the current harvest zone was approximately 350 bobcats. Clare's work suggested bobcat densities about one-half of what they are in the north. With this habitat suitability information Wildlife Research applied this new knowledge to land cover data for the state. Final estimates suggest about 14,500 square miles of highly suitable habitat in the north, with about 3,200 square miles in the south-central, and less than 300 square miles in the southeast/southwest regions. This recent research suggests a density of 0.27 cats/square mile of suitable habitat in central part of state, with an estimate of approximately 900–1,200 cats in the southern portion of Wisconsin. From our 30+ years of data collection in the north, our models suggest a sustainable harvest occurs at or near 10%. A harvest of 100 might be sustainable, but the suggestion was to start conservative, and ease up toward 100 over time. Most quota suggestions were in the 50–75 range, with a high of over 100 to a low of 5. Permit issuance is based on success rates for limited-draw furbearers, and with a new region the success rate of 60% was the consensus, which is at the high end of the success rate for Time Period 1 in the Northern Zone. A consensus was reached with a harvest quota of 50 for the inaugural season.

Committee Recommendation: Bobcat Southern Harvest Quota of 50 with a success rate of 60%.

North Zone Bobcat Harvest. Robert Rolley reviewed harvest information reported earlier in these minutes (page 11). Harvest success has been high the last four years since we implemented the longer, later two-time-period format, around the 50%–60% level. We've also documented a long-term, significant shift in the method of harvest with about 80% of the harvest being taken by hunters with trained dogs. With a shift in the method of take, we've also seen a similar shift in sex and age composition of the harvest with 60% being males, and a majority of the harvest being adults. In the last three years we've seen the percentage of adults in the harvest climb to over 70%. However, the data from 2012–13 isn't available until next year, being a one year lag in age analysis.

Beginning in the early 2000's, there has been an observed decreasing trend in winter track counts in both the number of tracks per transect and the percent of transects with tracks. The same trend occurs even if we block out the limited data from the past season of winter tracking. The

pregnancy rates this last year, based on observed placental scars, were below 50% for adult females. This below average pregnancy rate in adult bobcats has been observed for several years. Far more limited information is gathered from yearlings, but this data also suggests below average pregnancy rates. This is something to be concerned about.

We now have five years of deer hunter wildlife observation data, though not comparable annually due to changes in survey approach. Summary information shows the number of hours in the woods, bobcats sighted, and bobcats per 1,000 hours of deer hunting, but the data doesn't provide a discernible index and hard to see any trends. The five year average suggests more bobcats in north than in central regions, and lowest populations in southern regions of the state. Not of much value yet, but in time it might be. Bobcat harvester opinions, from our survey of all permit holders, saw a trend of increasing bobcats through the late 1990's and early 2000's, then dropping somewhat, and now being fairly level with another small drop last year. Bobcats run per day by hunters with dogs doesn't show much fluctuation over time, being between 0.6 and 0.9 cats per day with a slight downward trend in the last five or six years. In 2013 we observed one of its lowest levels.

During the last four years we've had the longer, split seasons and have calculated harvest versus effort. The trapping effort was calculated by bobcats taken per 1000 trap nights and hunter effort calculated by bobcats taken per hunter day. Trapper success shows a slight decline, but hunter effort with trained dogs is relatively stable.

Based on model calculations we're at the low end of our population goal range (2,500 \pm 20%). Model projections suggest a similar quota to last year could result in a slight decline, probably getting out of the goal range. However, there are questions regarding the current model.

The committee discussed the 2013–14 winter severity and its effects on bobcat populations in addition to what the low pregnancy rates and high adult proportion in the harvest could suggest. Quota suggestions ranged between 125 and 300, though most suggestions were between 200 and 225. After further discussion of available data, a consensus was reached at a quota of 240, splitting it evenly between the two time periods as in past years.

Committee Recommendation: Bobcat Northern Harvest Quota of 240.

Rule Proposals.

Conservation Congress County Resolutions, 2014. Ed Harvey provided an overview of those proposals presented at the 2014 Spring Hearings. Merely informational and no positions were taken as the Fur Harvest Committee of the Conservation Congress will review later this summer.

Wisconsin Conservation Congress Rule Proposal Update. Ed Harvey provided a review of the status of the Conservation Congress advisory proposals for 2014. These have already gone through the May Natural Resources Board meeting, so the committee does not need to take a position. However, we can provide input on non-statutory questions.

Trap Check Hours. The only non-statutory question relates to eliminating trapping hours (WCC Question #45). Although no one is certain, we believe the initial reason for having trapping hours was out of respect to landowners and landowner concerns about their rights. Current trapping hours are an expansion from previous, more restrictive hours. Part of the rationale of eliminating trapping hours was to provide more flexibility to people who work non-traditional

shifts. Concerns of eliminating the hours include: safety concerns, especially at midnight on opening day of muskrat season; law enforcement's ability to enforce trap check requirements; and with no set hours it would extend the period during which traps must be checked. In view of rule simplification the committee agreed a rule proposal should be drafted.

Committee Recommendation: Develop a rule eliminating trap check hours.

Weasel Box Opening. A new rule in place for this fall allows a four day trap check on weasel boxes if the opening is no greater than 1 3/8". In response to concerns regarding the maximum opening, a handout, developed by members of the DNR Marten Committee was provided on the research conducted when developing this opening size. This was informational for the committee and for the Conservation Congress Fur Harvest Committee to review.

Other questions had no discussion as they would require a statute change.

Rule Updates

Mink/Muskrat Season Update. Scott Loomans reported that the approved rule proposal, following 2013 Spring Hearings, was set aside for additional work. The Conservation Congress Fur Harvest Committee met in August 2013 and worked out a compromise and the Natural Resources Board adopted this in October 2013. This was then followed by procedural issues that delayed things as well. Ultimately, this rule will clear the review process this week and is the proposal of the Fur Harvest Committee. The statewide season will open the Saturday nearest to Oct. 25th and will close on the Sunday nearest to March 7th. The Mississippi River Zone will continue to open the second Monday in November or the day after duck season closes.

State Park hunting/trapping rules update. This rule process was initiated after Act 168 was passed and will clear the required legislative review this week. The main features are that only enclosed trigger-type traps will be allowed on dry land, and existing regulations for traps completely submerged in water will apply.

Foot Cable Restraint Advisory Question (2014). This was an advisory question on the recent spring hearing with strong support, so it now comes to the committee to develop a proposed rule for public hearings in 2015. Described in the proposal as something similar to the Beslile Foot Snare, we will refer to it as a foot cable restraint. The maximum jaw spread size is 8 inches, so we would suggest use after December 1st. This trap design passed Best Management Practices (BMPs) for trapping in relation to wolves and is currently in the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies' Wolf BMP. BMPs are an international standard that evaluates both efficiency and humaneness of different traps. This would provide another harvest tool for large canines. If approved by the committee the rule proposal will likely include a few additional components to the existing system, such as additional swivels.

Committee Recommendation: Develop a rule proposal for the foot cable restraint.

A reminder was given that before further proposal discussions, the committee should not take a position on things the Wisconsin DNR doesn't have statutory authority to do. Committee may make recommendations on issues, but can't include recommendations for statutory change.

Public comments:

Brian Stemper of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service commented regarding trapping hours. The Service has specific protocols that require daily trap checks and do not allow opening day trapping until 9 a.m. to control competition. After opening day then it goes from sunrise to sunset. With high numbers of waterfowl hunters they've observed that trappers are good about minimizing conflicts, but an occasional instance does occur. The Service attempts to keep things simplified because it's hard for law enforcement officers to manage the large volume of user interests during the same time.

New Rule Suggestions

Beaver/Otter Season. This proposal suggests a shortening of the beaver/otter season in the north by a month. This concept has been discussed and approved by this committee three times over the past four years, but was tabled by the Wildlife Policy Team until the Beaver Management Plan is completed. This plan is now in draft form and out to committee members for final review. The Beaver Task Force recommended this proposal move forward to the Furbearer Advisory Committee anticipating the completion and approval of the Beaver Management Plan. If we wait until the Beaver Management Plan is eventually approved, we'd miss a rule proposal year which would then delay critical changes until 2018 or 2019. One modification to the earlier rule proposal is to maintain trapping of beaver on identified, priority trout waters through April. In summary, this proposal would shorten the beaver/otter season by a month in the north (to March 31), but allow citizens to trap on priority trout waters until April 30.

Continued discussion emphasized the need to focus trapping effort on just those priority trout streams designated by Fisheries Management, not all Class I and II streams. Suggestions made requiring foothold-only trapping and/or require otter avoidance during this time period were tabled with the initial focus to educate about otter avoidance. Conclusion was to move forward on a proposal to shorten beaver and otter seasons in the north by one month (to March 31), work with Fisheries Management to determine which waters will be open for extended trapping.

Committee Recommendation: Develop a rule proposal shortening the beaver/otter seasons in the north while allowing continued harvest on designated, priority trout waters.

Otter/Fisher Zone Changes. Fisher zones were initially not created with consideration of ecological communities, but were constantly modified as fisher populations expanded throughout the state. Otter zones follow this same concept with one county having all three zones. In the spirit of simplification, suggestion was made to make furbearer zones more consistent and at the same time review the need for current management goals. Most committee members were not opposed to the general idea of modifying zones, but there was no agreement on new zone configurations. A sub-committee was formed to review fisher zones and bring a proposal for changes to the committee next year.

Committee Recommendation: Table for now, but via a sub-committee analysis, to consider a recommendation in 2015.

Mississippi River Zone. Suggestions have been raised about the Mississippi River Furbearer Zone and whether the conflict that originally justified its own zone still exists. Leaders in conservation in this area (and members of the Conservation Congress) support the concept of

changing the zone, but are concerned if such a change for furbearers might affect their need for the important waterfowl zone. New suggestion was to keep the zone line, but have season dates the same as Beaver Management Zone C. John Olson informed the group of an invitation to discuss this at the La Crosse County Conservation Alliance later this summer. If the season opened the same as Zone C it would move the opening day up by several weeks, allowing citizens, trappers, and USFWS more flexibility to harvest species, especially those with damage concerns like raccoon and beaver. This is preliminary, just to see if there's interest from the public for such a change, with no action needed by the committee.

Cable Restraint Breakaways. When testing cable restraints in 2000–2002, we settled on a 285 pound breakaway which had fairly high capture efficiency, but allowed wolves to break away. With wolves now state-managed the issues with a federally-protected species have disappeared. A 350 pound break away is the industry standard in all other states around Wisconsin, including Michigan and Minnesota. This would increase efficiency of catching coyotes and would still allow most wolves to breakaway. Concerns on holding a few more deer were expressed. Interest in moving forward for 2015 spring hearing, though information on wolves being able to breakaway effectively will be looked into.

Committee Recommendation: Move forward with a rule proposal that includes experiences of other states.

Jaw Spread Recommendations. Right now wolf harvest emergency rule says maximum of seven inches till after December 1. Regulations say eight inches, but emergency rule supersedes. The eight inch maximum is primarily for a beaver hind foot catch, but also applies to dry land as well. Before wolves, didn't hear about trappers setting eight inch jaw spread traps for coyote or fox. Many of the BMP traps that have been tested show that black bear will be held early in an eight inch jaw spread trap during early portions of the trapping season. The Wolf Committee is working on permanent rules and might be looking to the furbearer committee for advice. Committee recommends to the Wolf Advisory Committee to continue with the seven inch maximum on dry land before December 1st as a permanent rule. This affects all dry land trapping, not just wolf trapping.

Committee Recommendation: Move forward with a recommendation to the Wolf Committee to continue with the 7 inch maximum jaw spread on dry land until December 1st.

Foothold Trap Definition. Currently, the foothold trap is defined in Administrative Code as a "steel-jawed trap". We will now be promoting a polymer jawed trap that has passed BMP humaneness and efficiency standards, though technically right now not legal because of how we define foothold traps. Discussion was to re-define foothold trap from a "steel-jawed trap" to a "jawed trap". Committee agrees to a clean-up of the rule to redefine a foothold trap to better encompass traps shown to be humane and efficient.

Committee Recommendation: To review definitions and if need be, clean-up existing rule that defines foothold traps to better encompass all options of foothold devices.

Non-Resident Raccoon Season. The current non-resident raccoon harvest season starts two weeks later than the resident season. Some members had heard that many non-residents are prior

residents returning to hunt or trap with family, yet are restricted because they are a non-resident. Suggestion from some of the public was this rule doesn't have a purpose anymore. One committee member was concerned this would allow too much harvest by hound hunters from the south causing conflict with residents and wanted to leave rule as-is.

Committee Recommendation: Table for further review.

Public comment: Brian Stemper (called on by chair), of the US Fish & Wildlife Service. In regards to Mississippi River Zone, as discussed yesterday, the USFWS is concerned with a beaver population increase. Combining Zones C and D could potentially decrease our beaver population by extending the beaver season two months. This would give us 1 ½ months up front and two weeks at the end. This would achieve our goal. This rule simplification would appeal to some trappers that haven't been able to take advantage of open water trapping. Also concern with non-target take of beaver during otter season since there is no Mississippi River zone for otter. Otter opens in the south zone in November but beaver doesn't open until the day after duck season closes. So otter trappers are out possibly catching non-target beaver, but are unable to keep them. If that's something the state could deal with, that's something that should be addressed as well. However, there is concern with a longer muskrat season as river trappers are really concerned with muskrat populations and the Service is getting a lot of comments wanting to shorten or close the season. Not sure we'll get a whole lot of support if we want to open it earlier. And to a point made earlier, the Service can, and is more restrictive on some things, but try to follow state rules whenever possible. We wouldn't want to make things more complicated by such micro-management.

Finally, the committee expressed preference for having one, two-day meeting as opposed to two, one-day meetings. Committee will reconvene in 2015.

Adjourn: 3:58 p.m.