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Trapping proposals fall short of what state deserves

By BETSY ROBINSON

In recent years, at least six dogs have been caught and killed in traps in Montana, causing many people here to begin to question trapping regulations (or the lack thereof) and even trapping as an activity.

In response to increasing public concern, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks convened several meetings in the state, bringing together trappers, FWP biologists and concerned citizens to discuss the problem and come up with changes in trapping regulations to reduce the threat to recreationists and their pets. These proposed changes were to be submitted to the furbearer committee of FWP, which sets trapping regulations each year. Somewhere along the line, recreational users of public lands got shafted and the proposed changes never made it out of those meetings.

The furbearer committee met on June 12 in Helena, and the proposals that came out of that meeting are extremely disappointing.

Montana intends to continue to allow the trapping of wolverines the only state outside of Alaska to do so. No one knows exactly how many wolverines live in Montana; the most optimistic estimate by non-FWP wolverine biologists puts the number at 250, yet FWP wants to allow nine to be trapped this year. If there were only 250 elk left in Montana there is no way that FWP would allow elk hunting to continue, with good reason. In all of the lower 48 states, if we are lucky, there are about 500 wolverines left, and many of those are non-breeding subadults. Population biologists calculate that we need at least 400 breeding pairs to maintain genetic diversity and avoid a potential population crash. We have nowhere near those numbers.

Trapping wolverines is biologically unsound and unsupportable; the FWP biologists are just caving in to pressure from the trapping groups in this state, and many of the FWP biologists are trappers themselves, so they have self-interest in this issue as well. The Greater Yellowstone Wolverine Program recommends a long-term study over a large portion of the state to get an accurate assessment of the sustainability of the current harvest and urges extreme caution in regards to any wolverine trapping.

Then there is the problem of pets being caught and killed in traps on public lands. Currently, trappers can set traps within 50 feet of public trails in a ridiculously short distance. Instead of being sensitive to the potential for conflict, trappers take the position that all dogs should be leashed at all times on public lands so that they don't interfere with traps; a highly unreasonable position, considering that trappers are greatly outnumbered by recreational users in Montana.

Traps should be at least 300 feet from public trails and U.S. Forest Service roads, and signs

should be posted at trailheads warning people that traps are present. These regulations should apply to all trapping, including the year-round practice of varmint trapping for coyotes, weasels, muskrat and badgers. There are currently around 4,000 licensed trappers in Montana, versus tens of thousand of non-consumptive recreational users of public lands, yet the trappers continue to exhibit a callus disregard for the rights and safety of the non-trapping public, and they are backed up by the archaic regulations set by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Lastly, there is the issue of a minimum time within which trappers must check their traps. Currently, there is no legal requirement for checking traps. Most states require that traps be checked every 24 hours n a requirement that is the least we can expect for treatment of the public's wildlife and the safety of any companion animals that might be accidentally caught.

The public has until July 18 to comment on FWP's proposed trapping regulations; now is the time to let our voices be heard and assert our rights on our public lands. Anyone concerned about the safety of their pets on public lands, concerned about the fate of wolverines in Montana and possibly the rest of the lower 48 states, should write to FWP to urge them to end trapping of wolverines; to require a minimum setback from public roads and trails of at least 300 feet and that those regulations apply to all trapping; require that signs warning of traps be set at trailheads; and ask that FWP set a minimum trap check time of 24 hours to eliminate excessive suffering.

Comments can be mailed to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Attention: Public Comment, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701; or go to fwp.mt.gov/hunting and click on the line reading "Tentative 2008-09 Furbearer Seasons & Quotas," and e-mail comments from that page.

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