

States look to step up wolf kills

By **MATTHEW BROWN**
and **IRIS SAMUELS**
Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — Payments for dead wolves. Unlimited hunting of the animals. Shooting wolves from the air.

Wolf hunting policies in some states are taking an aggressive turn, as Republican lawmakers and conservative hunting groups push to curb their numbers and propose tactics shunned by many wildlife managers.

In Montana, lawmakers are advancing measures to allow shooting wolves at night and payments to hunters reminiscent of bounties that widely exterminated the species last century. Idaho legislation would allow hunters to shoot them from motorized parachutes, ATVs or snowmobiles year-round with no limits in most areas.

And in Wisconsin, just weeks after former President Donald Trump's administration lifted protections for wolves in the Great Lakes region, hunters using hounds and trappers blew past the state's harvest goal and killed almost twice as many as planned.

The timing of the Wisconsin hunt was bumped up following a lawsuit that raised concerns President Joe Biden's administration would intervene to restore gray wolf protections. The group behind the suit has close links to Republican political circles including influential donors the Koch brothers and notable Trump loyalists — Kris Kobach, a former U.S. Senate candidate from Kansas, and rock star and gun rights advocate Ted Nugent.

Antipathy toward wolves for killing livestock and big game dates to early European settlement of the American West in the 1800s, and flared up again after wolf populations rebounded under federal protection. What's emerging now is different: an increasingly politicized campaign to drive down wolf numbers sometimes using methods anathema to North American hunting traditions, according to former wildlife officials and advocates.

"It's not a scientific approach to wildlife management. It's management based on vengeance," said Dan Vermillion, former chairman of Montana's fish and wildlife commission. Vermillion and others said wolves were being used to stoke political outrage in the same way Second Amendment gun rights were used in recent elections to raise fears Democrats would restrict firearms.

Hanging in the balance is a decadeslong initiative that brought back thousands of wolves in the Rocky Mountains, Pacific Northwest and Great Lakes regions. Considered among scientists and environmentalists a major conservation success, the predator's return remains a sore point for ranchers



A gray wolf, a member of the Nez Perce pack, seen north of Old Faithful in Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming in 2002.

whose livestock are sometimes attacked by wolves and hunters who consider wolf packs competition in the pursuit of elk, deer and other big game.

In Montana and Idaho, wolf numbers exploded after their reintroduction from Canada in the 1990s. Federal protections were lifted a decade ago. The states have been holding annual hunts since, and wildlife officials cite stable population levels as evidence of responsible wolf management.

That's not satisfied hunting and livestock groups and their Republican allies in those legislatures, who contend 1,500 wolves in Idaho and 1,200 in Montana are damaging the livelihoods of big game outfitters and cattle and sheep producers.

"Too many wolves," Republican state Sen. Bob Brown said of his mountainous district in northwest Montana. He's sponsoring a bounty-like program that's similar to one in Idaho and would reimburse hunting and trapping expenses through a private fund.

A separate measure from Brown would

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THAT'S WOLF
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Carter Niemeyer | former
federal wildlife agent

allow the use of bait and night-vision scopes. Another proposal would allow snares, which critics say are indiscriminate and can accidentally catch pets or other animals.

In response to concerns that the treatment of wolves will drive away tourists hoping to glimpse one in places like Montana's Glacier National Park, Brown said their negative impact can't be ignored.

"I certainly believe there are people who come to look at wolves," he said. "But we are also hurting the outfitting industry."

Critics including Democratic state Sen. Pat Flowers, a former state wildlife department supervisor, warned of a significant toll on Montana's wolf population. State Senate Minority Leader Jill Cohenour, also a Democrat, said the proposals would "take us right back to having them listed" as an endangered species.

Wolves lost federal species protections in the western Great Lakes in 2011, but they were re-imposed three years later under court order.

The Trump administration lifted protec-

tions again five days before the November election, when former Interior Secretary David Bernhardt travelled to Minnesota to announce the move.

On President Joe Biden's first day in office, the White House said it would review the wolf decision.

Wisconsin officials already were planning a hunt in November when Hunter Nation, founded in 2018, sued to force a hunt immediately. The group cited a possible return of protections by the Biden administration.

Hunter Nation boasts its led by "America's greatest Hunters and Patriots" on its website, which also includes praise for Trump. Its leader, Luke Hilgemann, formerly served as CEO at Americans for Prosperity, a conservative advocacy group backed by industrialists Charles Koch and his deceased brother, David, that has spent tens of millions of dollars on Republican candidates.

Hunters and trappers killed at least 216 wolves of Wisconsin's 1,100 wolves over three days, nearly doubling the state's target of 119 animals and forcing an early shutdown of the season.

Hilgemann participated, and said in that he chased a wolf with dogs for 60 miles but never caught it. It's up to states to decide what kind of tactics they use, he said, while Hunter Nation will fight any attempt to halt the hunts. He said group has quickly grown to 20,000 members, but declined to divulge its financial supporters.

"Conservative, traditional American values of God, family and country — that's what we intend to focus on," Hilgemann said. "We need to get ahead of our predator populations including wolves. They will quickly expand their range. They reproduce quickly, spelling trouble for other wild game, livestock and pets."

Adam Winkler, a University of California, Los Angeles Law professor specializing in gun policy, said the group's messaging appears aimed at mobilizing hunters to get behind conservative causes.

"I'm not surprised we're seeing hunting groups wrap themselves in the mantle of patriotism," Winkler said. "Patriotism has become the watchword of the right."

Former federal wildlife agent Carter Niemeyer, who killed wolves that preyed on cattle in the Northern Rockies and was later involved in restoration efforts, said wolves are too resilient to be easily eradicated. But he warned the tactics being used will alienate large segments of the public to hunting and trapping.

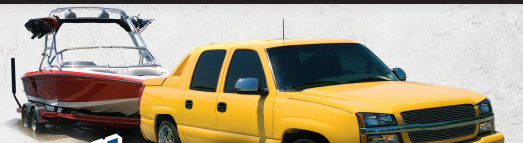
"They're running them down with hound dogs," he said. "That's wolf killing. That's not wolf trapping or wolf hunting."

Associated Press writer John Flesher contributed from Traverse City, Michigan.

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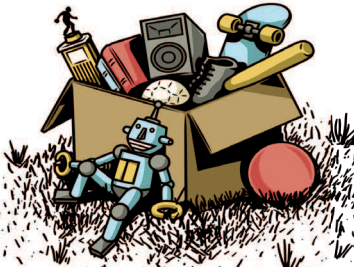
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3-8 CRYPTOQUIP

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YMZ RJ SMBFWMUFTY BMTYZQJ
HAFMBH CWMU GTS CWMU:

LGBM AGZZMU RGBSTMHH.

Saturday's Cryptoquip: IF EYORE'S PAL WERE A HORSE INSTEAD OF A BEAR, MAYBE HE WOULD BE NAMED WHINNY THE POOH.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: B equals L

3-9 CRYPTOQUIP

LM T BLBTESLH MLUO TIP
VPKP QSKLGLB T JLB
OALHTU RLQG ENEQSN, VNAUR
LS JP ETOPR GLEB BNEB?

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