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Hunters and trappers blow past Wisconsin's wolf kill target

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FILE - This July 16, 2004, file photo, shows a gray wolf at the Wildlife Science Center in Forest Lake, Minn. Wisconsin wildlife officials opened an abbreviated wolf season Monday, Feb. 22, 2021, complying with a court order to start the hunt immediately rather than wait until November. The hunt will run through Sunday, Feb. 28 across six management zones. (AP Photo/Dawn Villella, File)

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Hunters and trappers blew past Wisconsin's wolf kill target in less than 72 hours, forcing a premature end to a hunt that initially wasn't supposed to happen for another nine months and raising the ire of animal rights activists.

The Department of Natural Resources reported at midday Wednesday that 162 wolves had been killed, which was 43 more than the state's target of 119.

The agency estimated that about 1,000 wolves roamed the state before the hunt began. The department's population goal is 350.

The season began Monday and had been scheduled to run through Sunday, but DNR officials said the hunt would end at 3 p.m. Wednesday because so many animals had been killed in the first two days.

The wolf season has been one of the most contentious outdoors issues that Wisconsin has grappled with in the last 20 years.

Animal rights advocates have argued that wolf populations are too small to support hunting and that the animals are too majestic to kill. Farmers and rural residents, though, say wolves are killing their livestock and pets.

Wisconsin law hands wolf hunters and trappers significant advantages during the season. Unlike with deer hunting, wolf hunters and trappers can operate at night and use dogs to corner wolves. Snow cover also aids tracking.

Wayne Pacelle, president of animal rights group Animal Wellness Action, said in a statement Wednesday that killed Wisconsin wolves didn't stand a chance.

"Traps are set like landmines for unsuspecting animals and the hunters are deep into the woods and out of the range of communication, and they can easily claim they didn't get the 'stop the hunt' notice before they killed their wolf," he said.

Collette Adkins, carnivore conservation director for the Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based nonprofit that works to protect endangered species, issued a statement calling the Wisconsin hunt "a reckless slaughter."

Hunters and trappers exceeded the state's kill target during Wisconsin's 2012, 2013 and 2014 seasons, which were held before the wolf was placed back on the federal endangered species list.

Wisconsin law requires the DNR to give 24-hour notice of wolf hunting zone closures, which means hunters and trappers can keep killing wolves for another day after a closure is announced. If they kill a wolf after the zone is closed, they would face a \$330 fine.

The Trump administration removed federal protections for wolves in January, returning management to the states. Wisconsin law requires the DNR to hold an annual hunt between November and February. The department was preparing for a November hunt when Republican

lawmakers demanded the season start before the end of February, saying they were worried the Biden administration might re-list wolves before November and deny Wisconsin hunters a season.

The DNR resisted, but hunter advocacy group Hunter Nation won a court order earlier this month that forced the immediate launch of a wolf hunting season.

The DNR still plans to hold a November wolf hunting season.

Keith Warnke, the department's fish, wildlife and parks administrator, told the agency's policy board during a meeting Wednesday that hunters had exceeded the limit.

None of the board members expressed any reaction to the news. The board's chairman, Fred Prehn, said the target was too low given the population goal of 350 wolves and that the November target should be set to get closer to that goal.

Warnke said he didn't know if that would be safe for the overall population, but that the department would use that 350-animal goal to inform its decisions. He said new population estimates are expected in April.

Lawmakers in neighboring Minnesota have introduced dueling bills that would ban wolf hunting and establish a season.