

Smith: Wolf poaching bill deserves to be buried

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Is it a political ploy designed to curry favor with a block of voters? Or a legislative Hail Mary intended to spur action in Congress?

Or is it simply a desperate and ill-conceived proposal best sent to the woodshed?

While it might have elements of the first two options, after a lively hearing Wednesday at the state capitol I'm more convinced than ever Assembly Bill 712 has earned a place in the legislative landfill.

The proposed legislation would allow the wanton, unregulated killing of wolves in Wisconsin for as long as the species was on the federal Endangered or Threatened Species List.

It would also discontinue funding for wolf management in Wisconsin and make it illegal for state police, sheriffs or conservation wardens to enforce laws related to the management or killing of wolves.

Only federal agents could enforce wolf regulations in Wisconsin. And state law enforcement officials would be barred from assisting their federal colleagues.

The proposal's bizarre provisions earned it the moniker the "wolf poaching bill."

It was the first opportunity for public testimony on the proposed legislation, which was introduced Dec. 5; it was authored by Rep. Adam Jarchow (R-Balsam Lake) and Sen. Tom Tiffany (R-Eagle River).

The hearing drew a large crowd, most in opposition.

"I'm here because AB 712 is so unsound that it is an affront to our Wisconsin conservation tradition and invites a disrespect for law enforcement officers and the rule of law," said environmental attorney Jodi Habush Sinykin. "By barring state scientific research and basic population monitoring, this bill takes Wisconsin back 100 years, to a time when fear and ignorance determined our approach to wildlife."

Sinykin was among several who said AB 712, if passed, would only delay the process of wolf delisting and invite additional litigation.

The wolf in the Great Lakes region has been protected under the federal Endangered Species Act since a federal judge ruling in December 2014.

Wisconsin's gray wolf population increased to a record high of at least 925 animals in the winter of 2016-'17, according to the Department of Natural

Resources.

The latest estimate represents a 6% increase from 2015-'16 and a 24% rise from 2014-15..

After the wolf was delisted in 2012, Wisconsin held three consecutive hunting and trapping seasons, killing 117, 257 and 154 wolves, respectively. The wolf population showed a decline during the brief period of state management, according to DNR figures.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and most respected scientists regard the wolf population in Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan to be recovered sufficiently to be returned to state control

Attempts in Congress to delist the wolf have stalled despite the appearance of bipartisan support. Both Sen. Tammy Baldwin (a Democrat) and Sen. Ron Johnson (Republican) have said they favor state management of the species in Wisconsin.

Assembly Bill 712 was inspired at least in part by 2011 Idaho legislation. That state passed a bill after Gov. Butch Otter called a "wolf disaster emergency."

But the bill never was needed, as it came days after Congress had acted to remove the wolf in Idaho from federal protections. The key Idaho wolf provision came in the form of a rider introduced in a wide-reaching budget bill.

But all Congressional efforts have failed to return the wolf to state control in Wisconsin.

So AB 712 would allow wolves to be killed indiscriminately and leave it to the federal government to manage wolves in the Badger State, as long as they remained on the Endangered Species List.

Jarchow, who is running for an open state senate seat in western Wisconsin, was conspicuous by his absence at the hearing.

"I want to express my disgust that the lead author is not here," said committee member Rep. Nick Milroy (D-South Range). "I consider this (bill) nothing more than a political ploy for the author to appeal to his political base."

Rep. Rob Stafsholt (R-New Richmond), a co-sponsor, read a statement from Jarchow.

"It has been witnessed that the wolf population takes its toll on families, farms, hunters and more," the statement said. "Congress isn't acting in the best interests of Wisconsinites, so we must act in their stead."

In 2017, the state paid \$196,397 to farms, individuals and hunters for damage done by wolves, Stafsholt said.

But the number of confirmed wolf depredations decreased from 76 in 2016 to 42 in 2017, according to DNR records.

The bill was supported by the Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association and the Wisconsin Independent Business Association, a representative of farming and ranching interests.

But it was opposed by many other groups who noted several common points: the bill would abdicate the state's responsibility to manage wolves; would require law enforcement to ignore game laws; would prohibit data collection needed to manage wolves; and was done without consultation with American Indian tribes.

"Although the intent of the bill is to remove the wolf from federal protections, it will cost us financially and legally in the short and long run," said Eric Anderson, a professor at UW-Stevens Point, representing The Wildlife Society.

Similar points were made by Tom Hauge, former DNR wildlife director who represented Wisconsin's Green Fire, A Voice for Conservation.

Continuing the disturbing trend under the administration of Gov. Scott Walker, no current DNR employee testified at the hearing.

And the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation and Wisconsin Bowhunters Association, both of which have supported aggressive management of wolves through hunting and trapping, expressed more concern than support for the bill.

Melissa Smith of Madison provided a common sense test to the issue.

"I can't even believe I have to come to a committee hearing and say maybe poaching isn't such a good policy to encourage," Smith said.

Patricia McConnell, an animal behaviorist and livestock producer in western Dane County, said the bill would open Wisconsin to irresponsible game management.

Noting the name of the committee, she said: "I can't believe you want the heritage of your committee to be breaking the law in order to enforce it."

The hearing lasted about 3 1/2 hours. Thirty people registered against the bill, eight in favor, according to Legislative aides.

Wednesday's proceedings demonstrated two things: Our elected representatives need to listen to the collective wisdom of the citizens of the state, not just a handful of constituents or special interest groups.

And Wisconsin needs to update its wolf management plan to reflect the

latest science on and public support for the species in the Badger State.

Assembly Bill 712 is the wrong tool to return wolf management to the state.
It should be buried in committee.

In its place, calls to encourage our Congressional representatives,
especially House Speaker Paul Ryan, to remove the wolf from the Endangered
Species List will be more productive and less damaging to Wisconsin
wildlife management.