﻿WISPOLITICS: Fence-out Wolves to prevent livestock kills? Impractical, ag groups say

By WisPolitics.com

Few things stir northern Wisconsin residents or frequent visitors like the mention of wolves.

The expansion of wolves' territory over the years has thrilled wildlife lovers while angering deer hunters and farmers. Compensation payments for wolf damage are on the rise.

The latest example is a state budget proposal from Gov. Tony Evers to invest $3.7 million for fencing to prevent wolves killing or injuring livestock.

Evers’ budget proposes about $3.7 million for non-lethal abatement efforts and monitoring of wolves. The vast majority would go toward helping livestock producers pay for what aims to be predator-proof fencing. The remaining $25,000 would fund wolf monitoring efforts at the Department of Natural Resources.

Tyler Wenzlaff, national affairs coordinator for the Wisconsin Farm Bureau Federation, told WisPolitics the group appreciates Evers recognizing the “real and ongoing issue.”

“However, while fencing may offer some limited protections in some scenarios, it is not a comprehensive or long-term solution. Wolves are highly mobile predators and it’s been shown that fencing merely pushes the problem onto the next farm,” Wenzlaff said.

The fencing would be 75-inch wire fencing with a 42-inch apron pinned to the ground to keep wolves from digging under the barrier, according to DNR. The fencing would be used to deter wolves at chronic depredation sites and limit losses for livestock producers.

Wenzlaff said for many farmers, particularly those with larger pastures, maintaining and installing predator-proof fencing is “impractical.” Wenzlaff also criticized the state’s latest wolf management plan for including Marathon County and a portion of Wood County as part of a secondary range for wolves, an area he said is home to some of the highest cattle populations in the state.

Wisconsin Farmers Union President Darin Von Ruden said Evers’ proposal is “certainly a step in the right direction,” though not all farmers will be able to benefit.

“Some of our members’ farms that have 600, 700 acres that’s about four miles of that fence, and I’m not sure what it costs per foot or per mile to put that fence in, but if you’re going to spread that out over maybe a couple hundred farmers, that 3.7 is certainly going to help some, but not all,” Von Ruden said.

Von Ruden also raised concerns about large numbers of cattle concentrated in areas where wolf packs roam, saying those areas should be addressed first.

“But once those farms would get that up, the wolf packs are gonna move into another area. So really, we’re looking at probably many years of fencing needs because of that situation, that the wolf packs will just move into an area where they can then find other livestock to consume,” Von Ruden said.

Von Ruden also noted there could be challenges with installing fencing on the terrain, such as in Douglas and Buffalo counties and close to Lake Superior.

“You’ve got the hills and ravines and valleys, which always takes a lot more time and effort to get the fences in. And then also at that point, too, there might be places where wolves can get under the fence or maybe even over [it] at certain points, just depending on that topography,” he said.

DNR estimated the state’s wolf population at about 1,007 pack wolves in winter of 2022-23, the most recent data available. So far in 2025, 10 confirmed wolf depredations, eight confirmed wolf harassment incidents and one probable wolf harassment incident have been reported, along with nine unconfirmed complaints.

DNR can reimburse Wisconsinites for wolf depredation using general purpose revenue, endangered resources segregated funds from the conservation fund, or federal grants.

The agency has paid $3.7 million in wolf damage payments since 1985 to compensate for killed or injured pets and livestock, including $348,758 in 2024. Last year’s total was up from the $171,385 paid out in 2023.

Von Ruden said some farmers have had problems getting compensation under that system, particularly if there is nothing left of an animal to speak of.

“A lot of farmers like to tag their calves within the first 24 hours of being born so that they can identify them and then keep track of them. Well if the wolf carries it off and takes it to their den, which is probably going to be below ground, you never find any part of that animal back, including the tags.”

Retired wildlife biologist Adrian Wydeven of Wisconsin’s Green Fire said state funding to tackle depredation could become important, noting widespread cuts under the Trump administration.

Wydeven said DNR has relied heavily on the USDA Wildlife Services Program to help deal with wolf depredation. The program provides technical assistance to states and helps manage wildlife damage.

“In the past, that’s been mixtures of state monies and federal monies and with what’s been going on with the federal government, there’s probably a risk that the federal monies are going to become less. So there will be more of a need for the state to fund Wildlife Services to do their depredation management work,” Wydeven said.

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