

FURBEARER REGISTRATION Q & A

Background:

Each year, the MN DNR collects detailed harvest information for 4 species of furbearers in the State (fisher, marten, bobcat, and otter). Information is collected at fur registration stations on designated days, or by appointment with selected DNR staff (consult the regulations book for specific locations). The purpose of this sheet is to provide answers to common questions regarding the purpose for furbearer registration and why we collect specific information. It is NOT a general synopsis of furbearer harvest regulations, or a legal interpretation of any trapping laws.

Q1: *Why do we have to 'register' our harvest of these 4 species?*

A: The answers below provide additional detail, but in a general sense, these 4 species have several attributes that distinguish them from other furbearers within the State. Comparatively, they: 1) occur at low density; 2) have lower reproductive 'potential'; 3) have 'restricted' distributions; 4) appear less adaptable to human alteration of habitat; and 5) are, for some of the previous reasons, more prone to population decline and slower population recovery. Because harvest likely represents a significant mortality source for these species, it is important that we obtain accurate information on key harvest statistics. Less detailed harvest information is obtained for other furbearer species through a voluntary 'post-card' survey that is mailed to trappers every year. While such information is valuable and currently sufficient for these other species, it cannot provide the level of harvest detail or verification deemed necessary for fisher, marten, bobcat, and otter.

Q2: *Why are pelts 'tagged' at fur registration?*

A: Pelts are tagged as a way to 'verify' that each individual animal has been registered, and hence accounted for in our harvest totals. This ensures the data is complete, rather than a simple 'estimate' of harvest. For bobcat and otter, federal regulations also play a role in fur tagging. CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) is essentially an international 'treaty' to which the U.S. is a 'party'. The 'treaty' was developed in order to prevent international black market trade in endangered species. While bobcat and otter are not federally (or state) listed as threatened/endangered species, there are other species of cats and otter found throughout the world that *are* endangered. Bobcats and otter in the U.S. are currently listed on CITES because they are 'look-alike' species, meaning their pelts resemble other otter/cat species in the world that are endangered. Before pelts of these 'look-alike' species can be exported, each country needs a system in place to verify the animals are legally harvested within their respective country. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), responsible for developing the U.S. CITES program, opted to utilize tags to verify 'legal acquisition' of pelts leaving U.S. borders. They provide the MN DNR (and other states) with bobcat and otter CITES tags each year, which we then apply at fur registration, thereby allowing MN bobcat and otter pelts to be exported out of the country in the fur trade. Importantly, we also use these federal tags for a dual state purpose – to verify (like our fisher/marten tags) that those animals have been registered. While there is ongoing national debate that may restructure the federal program (e.g., to remove bobcat as a CITES species, allow alternatives other than tags, etc), the State currently plans to continue its system of tagging to ensure we obtain accurate harvest tallies for these species.

Q3: *Why do we have to submit furbearer carcasses/heads?*

A: When 'modern' harvest was resumed for these species in the late-70's (fisher, bobcat, otter) or mid-80's (marten), carcass collections were voluntary for a few years, and then became mandatory. Depending on species, carcass collections may be continuous, as has been the case for marten and bobcat, or periodic as has been the case for fisher (1977-1994, 2010-??) and otter (1977-1986). Carcasses can provide a wealth of information, from genetics to food habits. However, DNR has primarily collected carcasses for 2 key pieces of information – the age of the animals, and data on reproductive parameters (pregnancy rate and litter size). Age data is obtained from analysis of teeth, while reproductive data requires retrieval of reproductive organs from whole carcasses. In the case of bobcats, we also verify sex of carcasses because research has shown many males are mistakenly called females by fur-harvesters. Age data and reproductive information, along with harvest totals and estimates of natural mortality, are key 'inputs' used in population models. Population models vary in complexity, but can be thought of simply as 'calculators' designed to estimate and track changes in population size. Essentially, one estimates a 'starting' population size (in our case, for 1977), then add births (estimated from carcass data) and subtract deaths (e.g., harvest registration data) for that year, and what's left 'carries over' until next spring when the process repeats itself. When population models were developed in the 1970's, it was important to get 'input' (carcass) data for all 4 species. Since that time, carcass collections have been both temporarily and permanently discontinued depending on species. Changes to carcass collections may occur, for example, due to the magnitude of observed variability in parameters of interest, known or suspected changes in population status or dynamics, or as part of formal research projects. Changes may occur not only in which species are

collected, but also what parts are collected (e.g., whole carcass versus head only), and are likely to continue to change through time (more or less information required).

Q4: *Why are we asked to provide information on sex, date, and location of harvested animals?*

A: The value of sex-specific harvest information should be obvious – a harvest of 500 males will affect the population differently than a harvest of 500 females. Date information is valuable for documenting how season timing and length affects total harvest, sex-specific harvest, and age-specific harvest, and for predicting the ‘results’ of proposed changes in the timing or length of seasons. We regularly review such information, particularly when season changes are proposed. Currently, DNR requests harvest locations be reported at the ‘scale’ of the township (36 square mile area). We recognize that hunters/trappers are hesitant about revealing harvest locations, which is why we do not ask for more detailed data (e.g., quarter sections). Location data, from both accidental and intentional harvest, has been valuable for documenting changes in the distribution of a species, and can also provide data for a coarse-scale habitat analysis. Because of the value of such data, trappers are encouraged to record such information on the day of capture, or soon thereafter. This will minimize data inaccuracy (“I think I caught that male on the 14th”), and will also speed up the registration process.

Q5: *Why are we asked questions about method of take?*

A: Bobcats are the only species that can be harvested by both hunters and trappers. Distinguishing method of take (hunt versus trap) allows us to look at some of the data described above (sex-, age-, time-, or location-specific harvest data) separately for the different ‘user groups’. Trappers are now also asked what type of trapping device the animal was captured in. Again, this type of information helps us better describe the ‘nature’ of the harvest, in this case how the tools of the trade relate to temporal, biological (sex, age), and geographic harvest parameters. Fur-harvesters should not be concerned that there is some ‘hidden agenda’ with such data collection. We want to have the best data we can to ensure we make sound management decisions, which requires, among other things, an understanding of the dynamics of the harvest.

Q6: *Why are pelts supposed to be removed from animals prior to bringing them to registration?*

A: First, because tags (see Q2) can be more quickly attached. Dried pelts are acceptable, though trappers are asked to open up the eye hole on a dried pelt if necessary for the tags to fit (or place an object, such as a pen cap, through the eye hole before it dries). Using a knife or screwdriver, we can open the eye on a dried pelt at the time of registration, but to speed the process and avoid damaging the pelt, we prefer trappers do this prior to registration. Secondly, pelting animals prior to registration is necessary so we can collect carcasses at the time of registration, rather than having to individually follow-up with each trapper at a later date to ensure carcasses were submitted. Finally, depending on species, carcass collections may be continuous, as has been the case for marten and bobcat, or periodic as has been the case for fisher (1977-1994, 2010-??) and otter (1977-1986). Requiring all pelts be removed regardless of carcass collection status in a given year minimizes problems that would arise from periodically changing procedures for different species at different times - all species must be skinned every year prior to registration, with only periodic changes in what carcasses/heads must be submitted. It should not be difficult to at least skin animals prior to registration, even those caught on the last day of the season. DNR is currently considering some exemptions to this requirement (e.g., special taxidermist skinning desired that can't be completed by fur registration). If changes are eventually approved, they will be explained in the regulations synopsis.

Conclusions

Collecting harvest data is a key component of managing most wildlife populations. The level of detail or accuracy required will vary by species. In the case of fisher, marten, bobcat, and otter, we believe detailed and accurate harvest information is imperative to ensure sustainable harvests and populations. We recognize that recording and providing such information can be a ‘nuisance’. However, we would not collect such data if we did not think it was valuable. Harvest seasons, in order to persist, must be defensible. Most importantly, it is the DNR's responsibility to show that harvests are not jeopardizing the future of those populations. This, of course, is in the fur-harvesters best interest as well. Fur-harvesters play an important role in providing some of the data necessary to manage wildlife and defend harvest seasons, and ultimately to help ensure that ‘our grandchildren’ can enjoy these resources as well. We thank you for the data you provide, and ask that you strive to provide highly accurate data. DNR has forms available on our web site (www.dnr.state.mn.us/hunting/smallgame/index.html) that you can use to record your harvest information for these species. These forms should also be available at fur registration stations each year, as well as at the DNR booth at trapper conventions. While you are not required to use them, we encourage you to do so. Record the data soon after each capture to maximize accuracy. This will also speed up the process of registering your fur.

If you have additional questions regarding furbearer registration, feel free to contact John Erb (218-999-7930), or your local Wildlife Manager. Thank you.