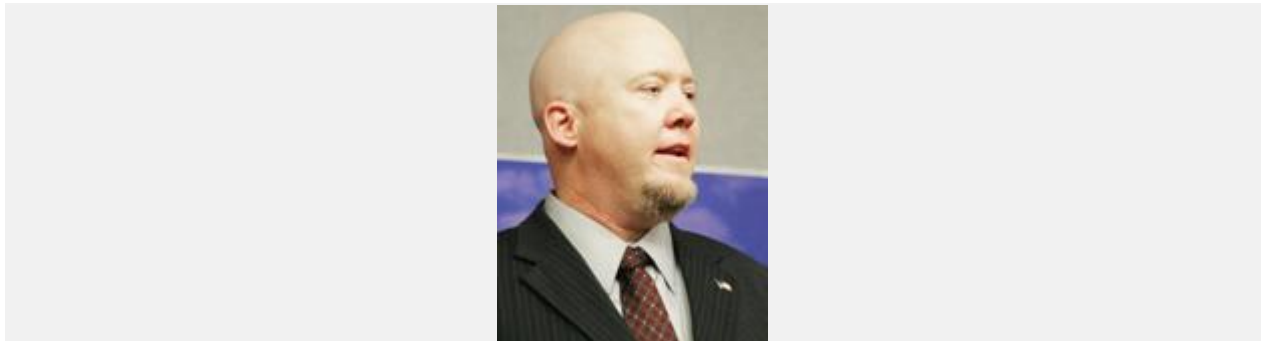




Maureen Hackett, president of Howling for Wolves, aims to flex her group's political muscles at the polls in the hopes of boosting its influence at the Capitol next session. (File photo: Kevin Featherly)

Wolf group focuses on House swing districts

By: Mike Mosedale September 12, 2014 0



Rep. Jason Isaacson, DFL-Shoreview, has the backing of Howling for Wolves. While wolf advocacy may be a boutique issue, Isaacson says, it's one that engenders unusually intense sentiments. (File photo)

Ever since the Legislature authorized a sport hunting and trapping season for gray wolves, the advocacy group Howling for Wolves has been at the forefront of the opposition, lobbying lawmakers, launching legal challenges and renting out prominent billboards with the in-your-face slogan, "Stop DNR Torture." Despite success in sustaining public awareness and impressive fundraising totals of almost \$600,000 in under two years, however, the Hopkins-based organization has struck out in its principle goal: convincing lawmakers to reinstate the five-year moratorium on the wolf harvest, which was part of the state's original plan for managing the population following the removal of federal protections.

With the state's third wolf season set to kick off four days after Election Day, Maureen Hackett, HFW president and founder, aims to flex HFW's political muscles at the polls in the hopes of boosting its influence at the Capitol next session.

In a call to action on its website, HFW is asking its supporters to volunteer and donate on behalf of five House candidates — four incumbents and one challenger — who are running in hotly contested swing districts. The outcome of those races will likely determine whether the DFL retains control of the House.

"We're highlighting the races where we think engagement can really make a difference in a big way. These are very tight races where we know the candidate is pro-wolf," Hackett said. "We have a network of around 25,000 supporters in the state who we can communicate with district by district."

Can a relatively small-bore issue like the wolf hunt move the needle at the polls?

Rep. Jason Isaacson, DFL-Shoreview, one of the candidates HFW is backing, thinks so. Maybe.

"It depends on how tight the race is. But if a candidate needs help getting the mail out or needs help door knocking, it absolutely could make a difference," said Isaacson. "Howling for Wolves isn't like the Chamber of Commerce or the AFL-CIO. It's boutique-ish. But it also has some real statewide appeal and they've got some wealthy supporters."

While it may be a boutique issue, Isaacson noted, it's one that engenders unusually intense sentiments. According to the DFL House caucus' informal list of the volume of constituent contacts ranked by issue, in fact, the wolf hunt came in second only to the minimum wage, and it exceeded such other hot button topics as medical marijuana and MnSure.

Isaacson, who is seeking a second term in the DFL-leaning suburb where he won by a 15 point margin in 2012, occupies the safest of the five House races HFW has targeted. That relatively easy victory came in a good year for Democrats against a relatively weak opponent.

Isaacson said he anticipates this year's race will be more competitive and isn't taking anything for granted, particularly given the prospect of heavy outside spending. "I've been told by people I trust that independent expenditure groups might spend between \$50,000 and \$100,000 in October," Isaacson said. As a cautionary example, Isaacson noted that another HFW-backed candidate, Rep. Will Morgan, DFL-Burnsville, was elected by a 12-point margin in 2008 only to lose by three points in 2010. Morgan's race against GOP challenger Roz Peterson — a reprise of the 2012 campaign — is expected to be among the tightest this year.

The other two incumbents in races targeted by HFW are Rep. Yvonne Selcer, DFL-Minnetonka, who was elected by less than one point in 2012, and Rep. Paul Rosenthal, DFL-Edina, who won by a more comfortable six-point margin in 2012 but faces a tougher race this year.

HFW is backing one challenger in a House race: DFLer Jefferson Fietek who is running against Rep. Mark Uglen, R-Champlin, a first-termer in a Republican-leaning district. Hackett said Fietek merited support based on his previous support for HFW and, conversely, said Uglen was not receptive to HFW's arguments when he served on the House Environment and Natural Resources Policy Committee.

Hackett, a former DFL candidate for the 3rd Congressional District, announced that the group is endorsing Andy Dawkins, who is running for attorney general under the banner of the Green Party against incumbent DFLer Lori Swanson. Hackett cited Swanson's role in the legal fight over the DNR's decisions to sidestep the formal public comment in advance of the inaugural wolf hunt.

While pro-wolf bills made scant progress at the Legislature over the last two sessions, two relatively modest measures were included in the omnibus Game and Fish bill — a requirement that the DNR track known wolf deaths on a quarterly basis and doubling of fines for wolf poaching.

Various bills to impose a five-year moratorium on the hunt, ban the use of snares, traps and bait to take wolves and prohibit wolf hunting and trapping on Indian reservations failed to make it out of committee. Still, Isaacson, who authored the stalled moratorium bill, said the session was not a total washout.

"Very little happened in terms of legislation, but a lot happened in terms of setting the table," he said. "I knew there was no way we'd win a straight up and down vote on a moratorium. But we began to ask tough questions about the DNR because it's quite clear that they don't have a real grasp on the wolf population."

This summer, the Department of Natural Resources announced that it would increase the harvest target for the upcoming season to 250 wolves, up 30 from last year. It also plans to issue an additional 500 licenses to hunters and trappers, for a total of 3,800.

According to the agency's estimates, the state is currently home to 470 wolf packs and about 2,423 wolves. Those numbers are disputed by Hackett and other critics, who question the methodology.