

Furbearers



April 2024



Introduction

Montana is home to ten different species classified as furbearers. Those furbearers include beaver (*Castor canadensis*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), fisher (*Martes pennanti*), lynx (*Lynx canadensis*), marten (*Martes americana*), mink (*Mustela vison*), muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*), otter (*Lontra canadensis*), swift fox (*Vulpes velox*), and wolverine (*Gulo gulo*). Lynx and wolverine are protected by federal law under the Endangered Species Act and no harvest seasons are allowed. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) monitors and manages its furbearer species for conservation, to maintain biodiverse intact ecosystems, and to provide opportunity for enjoyment (i.e., viewing opportunity and trapping) by all Montanans. When furbearers are abundant, responsible and regulated harvest of these species not only provides recreational

opportunity for the public, but also allows biologists to collect data that informs population and habitat management, research project needs, and regulatory actions. This document summarizes FWP’s Region 2 (R2) 2023 furbearer regulations, harvest data, and proposed quota changes.

Trapping License

Sales: The harvest of Montana’s furbearers is a tradition and recreational opportunity that is highly valued by many Montanans. The increase in sales of trapping licenses from 1946 to present shows this continued and growing interest.

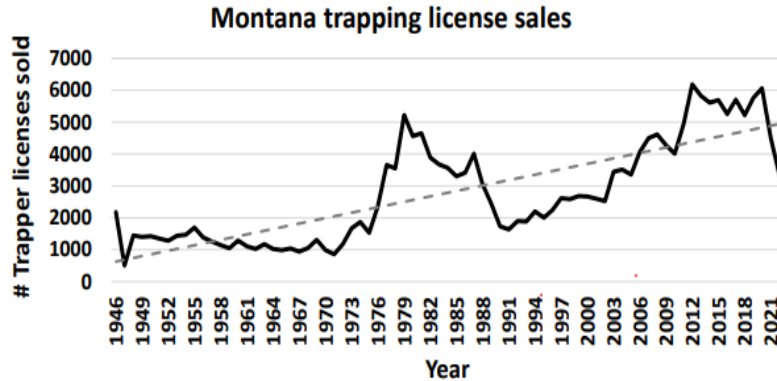


Figure 1. Long-term trapping license sales in Montana, 1949–2022 license years.

License sales peaked during the 2012-2013 season, when over 6,000 trapping licenses were sold (Figure 1). This peak was likely spurred by high furbearer pelt prices in addition to Montana’s first wolf trapping season, which opened in 2012 and required a trapping license. However, since 2020 license sales have significantly declined.

Furbearer Harvest Licensing Requirements: Prior to 2022, members of the public interested in purchasing a trapping license were not required to take a mandatory trapper education course and a trapping license could be purchased over the counter. However, legislation passed in 2021 established a mandatory trapper education course and set new licensing requirements. Starting in 2022, a trapper must either complete an approved trapper education course to purchase a trapping license or must have held a valid trapping license for 3 previous years.

While most furbearers are harvested via trapping, bobcats may be hunted with the aid of hounds in addition to trapping. Prior to 2022, bobcat hunters who never planned to trap were still required to purchase a trapping license to legally harvest bobcats. This added complexity when the trapper education requirement was established. To avoid requiring bobcat hunters to take the trapper education course, a new bobcat hunting license was developed and in 2023, 672 bobcat hunting licenses were sold.

BOBCAT

Bobcat Quota & Regulations: Bobcats are defined as a furbearer species in Montana and a trapping license or bobcat hunting license is required to harvest bobcats. All bobcat hunters and trappers are required to report their harvest within 24 hours, present the hide to FWP personnel for tagging, and provide a cleaned and air-dried

lower jaw for FWP collection and aging. The bobcat hunting and trapping season opens December 1st and closes if the regional quota is reached, or on February 15th. The bobcat quota changed 5 times from 2000 to 2023 with of range of 100 - 200 bobcats. The 2023 quota of 150 bobcats has been in place since 2019. In Region 2, hunters and trappers are limited to a personal quota of 7 bobcats per season. The personal quota of 7 bobcats has been in place since 1996.

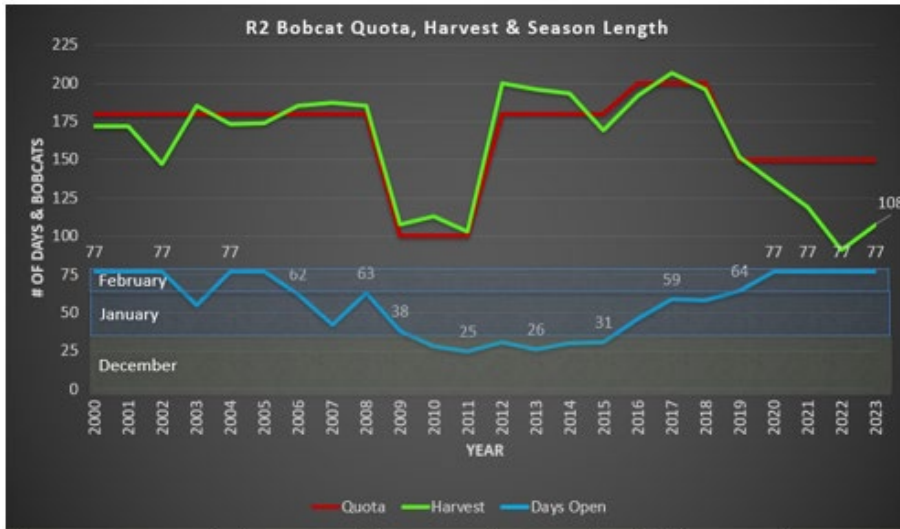


Figure 2. Region 2 bobcat quota, harvest, and season length (days open) 2000-2023.

the season remained open through February 15th (77 days, Figure 2). Of the total bobcats harvested each year, trappers, hunters using dogs, and hunters without dogs typically harvest 63%, 33%, and 1%, respectively.

Bobcat Management: R2 bobcat quotas are reviewed annually, and are adjusted based on harvest data, hunter and trapper effort, pelt prices, and field observations

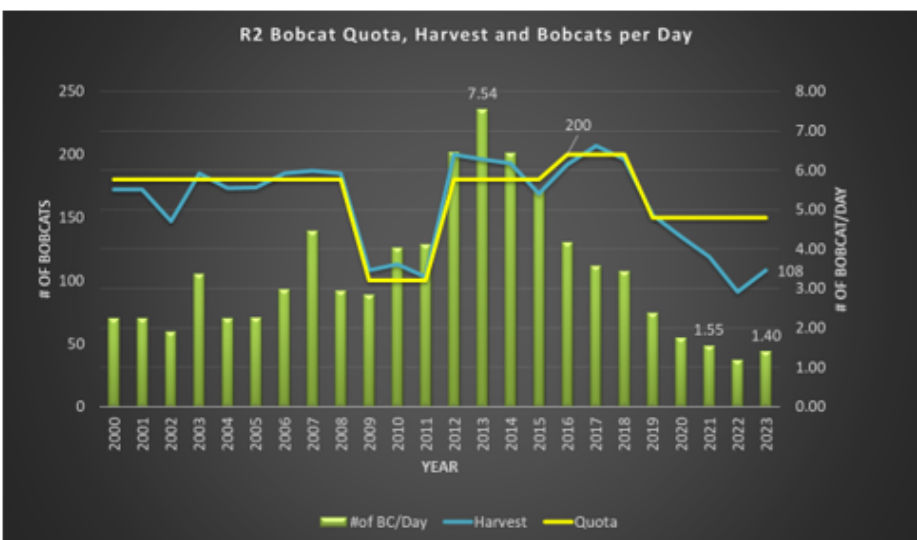


Figure 3. Region 2 bobcat quota, harvest, and number of bobcats harvested per day 2000-2023.

Harvest: Bobcat harvest in R2 typically mirrors the quota, except for in recent years where the quota was not reached and the season remained open through Feb 15. Harvest ranged from a low of 91 bobcats in 2022 to a high of 207 in 2017. In 2023, 108 bobcats were harvested, and the

from biologists, hunters, and trappers. Bobcat harvest data includes the number, sex, and age of harvested individuals. Harvest data such as the number of bobcats harvested per day, juvenile per adult ratio,

and the percent of adults that are yearlings help direct annual quota setting in R2.

The number of bobcats harvested per day is a way to compare harvest rates between seasons. On average, 3.37 bobcats are harvested every day (2000-2023 average, Figure 3). During the 2013 harvest season a record high of 7.54 bobcats were harvested per day. From 2019 through 2023, the number of bobcats harvested per day dropped below the long-term average (Figure 3). It is important to recognize when harvest rates are below the long-term average, but it is difficult to know exactly what is driving the low harvest rates. Variables such as bobcat abundance, bobcat pelt price, and hunter

and trapper effort are likely influencing the differences seen from year to year.

The juvenile per adult ratio may be used as an indicator of how productive a population is. The higher the ratio, the more likely recruitment is contributing to an increasing population (Newell

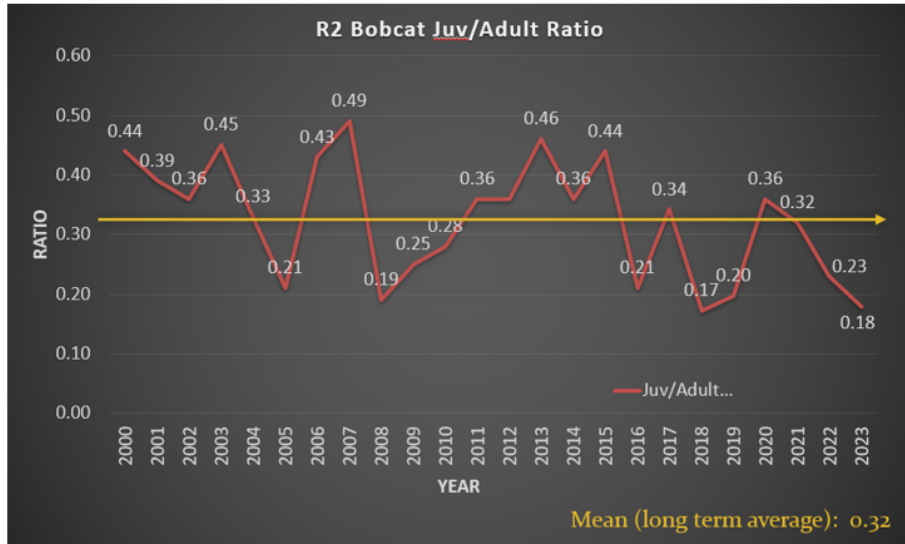


Figure 4. Region 2 bobcat juvenile per adult ratio observed in the harvest 2000-2022.

and Podruzny 2018). While ratios vary by region, the R2 long term average juvenile per adult ratio of .32 (yellow line) is used as a baseline to help evaluate annual ratios

(Figure 4). A ratio above or close to .32 may indicate that recruitment is contributing to a stable or growing population. Ratios below .32 may indicate that recruitment is low and the population may be decreasing. In 2022, the juvenile per adult ratio was below the long-term

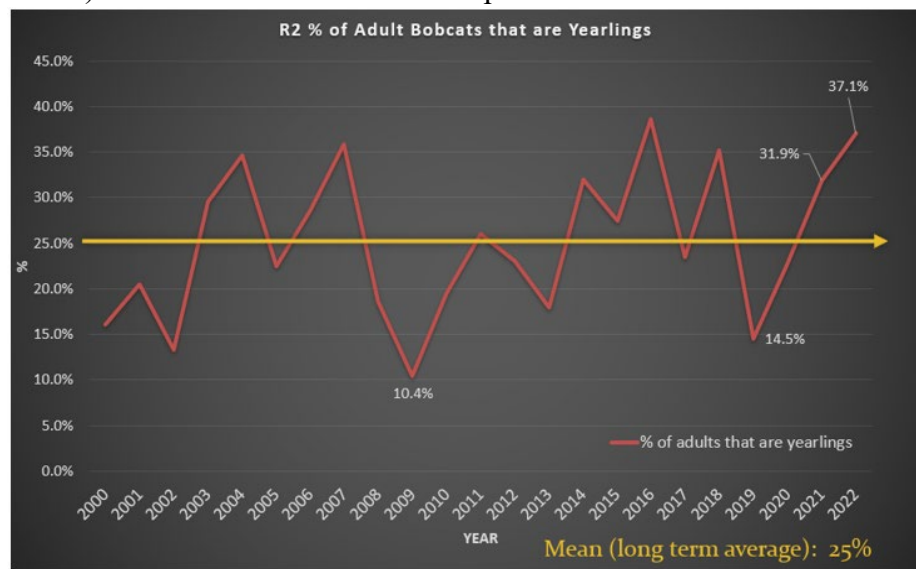


Figure 5. Region 2 percent of adults that are yearlings in the bobcat harvest 2000-2022.

trend and may indicate the population is declining. However, the two previous years (2020 & 2021) were at or above the long-term average and the combination of the three years (2022-2023) may be suggesting a relatively stable population.

The percent of adults in the harvest that are yearlings is used to help evaluate survival and recruitment. When the percent of adults that are yearlings is above our long-term average of 25% (yellow line), it suggests that both recruitment and survival in the first year (from kitten to yearling) may be contributing to an increasing population. In 2021 and 2022 the percent of adults that are yearlings is above the long-term average at 31.9% and 37.1% (Figure 5).

Bobcat pelt price is often an important driver of hunter and trapper effort. As seen in Figure 6, the season closes early because the quota is reached when pelt prices are higher. In 2012, average bobcat pelt prices reached a high of \$589.08, with the highest quality pelts selling for over \$1,200, and the R2 quota

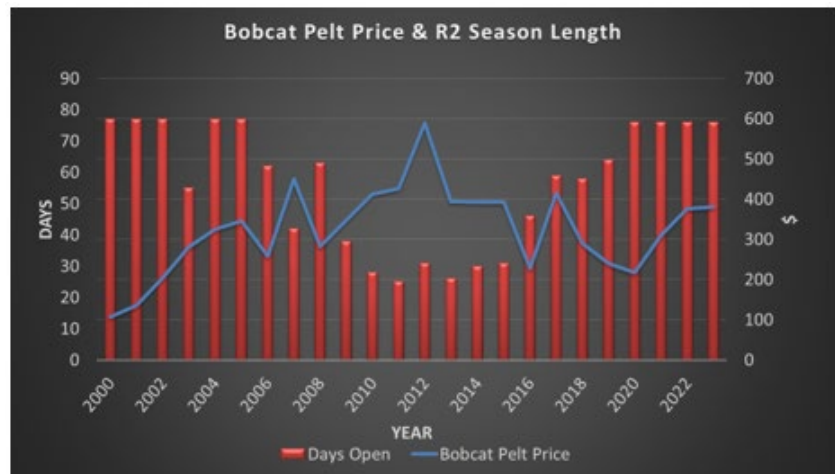


Figure 6. Region 2 bobcat season length and pelt price 2000-2023.

was reached in less than 30 days. While the 2023 average pelt price of \$380.97 is higher than many previous years, it may not be high enough to encourage more trapper and hunter effort which is likely indicated by the season remaining open the full 77 days. It is important to note that there are many factors driving hunter and trapper effort, and pelt prices alone may not provide a full picture especially when considering relatively high economic inflation and gas/fuel costs. It is unclear how fur prices, inflation rates, and fuel/gas prices may influence effort and each trapper likely has a threshold that determines when trapping is worth the costs of all the factors involved. Further, recent declines in trapping license sales in combination with attrition of older trappers are certainly influencing trapping effort.

R2 Bobcat Quota Recommendations 2024: No Change. While harvest remains well below the current quota of 150 bobcats, the harvest trends do not raise any concerns for the 2024 season. Harvest rates are influenced by a variety of factors influencing hunter effort including pelt prices, inflation/increased gas prices, variable field conditions, and more. While the juvenile to adult ratio for 2022 was below the long term average, the percent of adults that are yearlings in the 2022 harvest indicates an

above average proportion of young adults that should increase recruitment in future years.

OTTER

Otter Quota and Regulations: Otter is defined as a furbearer species in Montana. A trapping license is required to legally trap otter. Trappers are required to report a harvested otter within 24 hours, present the pelt to FWP personnel for tagging, and provide a clean and air-dried lower jaw for FWP specimen collection and aging.



The otter trapping season opens on November 1st and closes on April 15th, or when the regional quota is reached. Prior to 2000, a trapper was limited to one otter per year and there was no regional quota. The R2 quota has increased four times since 2002, from 13, 20, 25, up to 40 otters in years 2002, 2009, 2014, and 2021, respectively. From 2000 to 2020, a personal quota of three otters per season was in place. The personal quota increased to four in 2021 and is still in place.

Otter Harvest: Otter harvest closely follows the quota and the season often closes before the regulatory close on April 15th. Harvest ranged from a low of four otters in the early 90s to a high of 41 otters in 2023 (Figure 7). Otter harvest is widespread and occurs in every major watershed in R2 (Figure 8). Incidental otter captures in beaver traps accounts for approximately 1-2 harvests every year. There were 3 incidentally trapped otters in 2023.



Figure 8. Region 2 otter harvest locations 2019-2023.

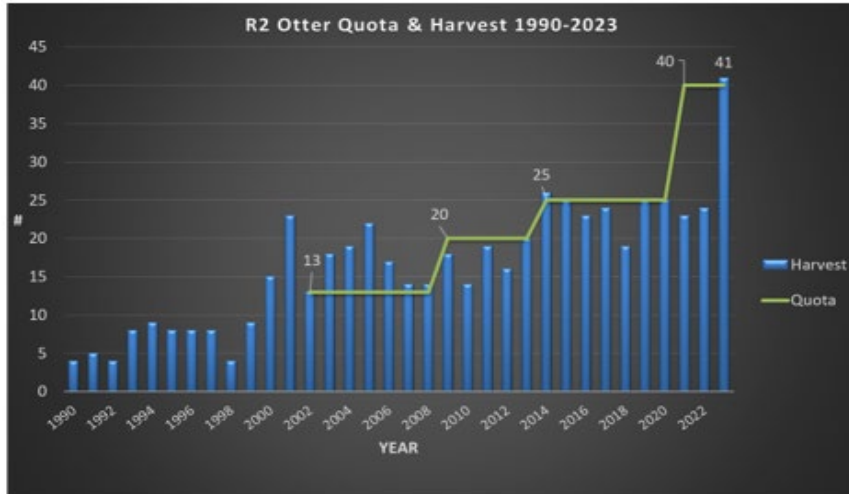


Figure 7. Region 2 otter quota and harvest 1990-2023.

Otter Management: R2 otter quotas are reviewed annually, and are adjusted based on harvest data, and biologist and trapper field observations. Otter harvest data includes the number, sex, and age of harvested individuals. The percent of juveniles and yearlings in the harvest

help inform annual quota setting in R2.

The proportion of juveniles and yearlings in the otter harvest may help identify if the population is decreasing, stable, or increasing. If the proportion of juveniles and yearlings observed in the harvest is below 20% then the population is likely declining (Tabor 1974, Lauhachinda 1978, Mombray et al. 1979, Anderson and Scanlon 1981, Melquist and Hornocker 1983, Polechla 1987, Diggs 2013). If the proportion is between 20% and 43% then the population is likely stable, and if the proportion is above 43%, it's likely increasing.

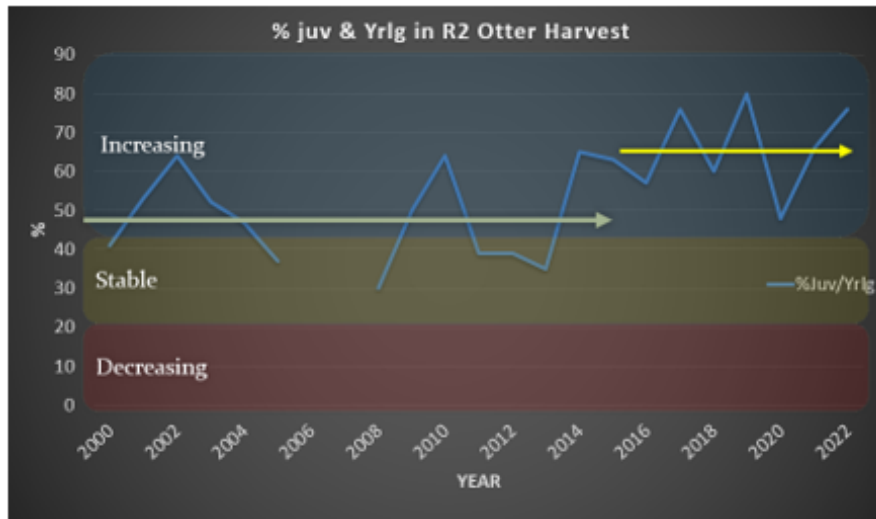


Figure 9. Region 2 percent of juveniles and yearlings observed in the otter harvest 2000-2022.

From 2000 to 2015, the average proportion of juveniles and yearlings seen in the harvest is 47.4%. From 2016 to 2022, the average proportion of juveniles and yearlings observed in the harvest increased to 65.8% (Figure 9). This suggests that otter numbers may be increasing in R2.

Trappers have also reported observing more otters in recent years than they have in previous years, which supports our interpretation of the harvest data.

R2 Otter Quota Recommendations 2024: No Change. The quota of 40 otters has been in place for 3 years and 2023 marks the first year that the quota was reached. Less than 25 otters were harvested in 2021 and 2022. The current quota appears to be

adequate at this time and the trends in the harvest data do not indicate the quota needs to be lowered.

MARTEN



Marten Regulations: Marten are defined as a furbearer species in Montana. A trapping license is required to legally trap marten. Trappers are required to report a harvested marten within 24 hours and present the pelt to FWP personnel for tagging. In 2022 and 2023, a voluntary muscle sample was collected from harvested marten for genetics. The marten trapping season opens December 1st and closes on February 15th. There is currently no R2 quota or personal quota.

Marten Harvest: On average 295 marten are harvested annually in R2 (1994-2023). In 2013, marten harvest reached a high of 696 marten. In 2023, 226 marten were harvested (Figure 10).

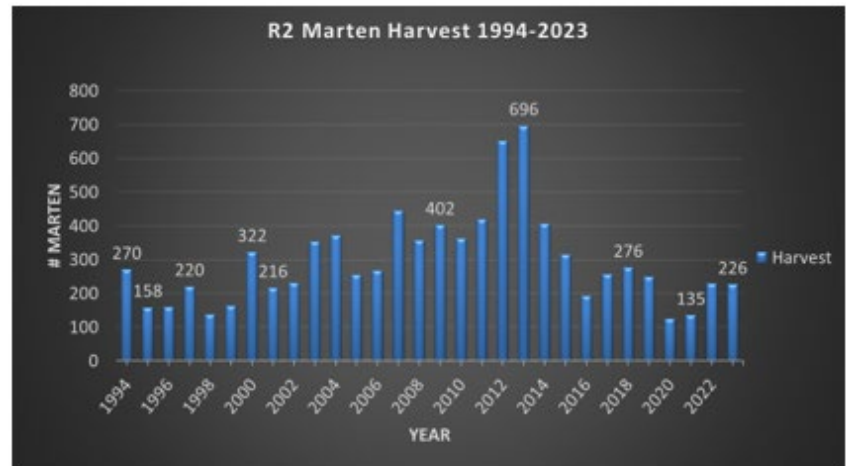


Figure 10. Region 2 marten harvest per year 1994-2023.

Trapper effort and marten harvest tend to be correlated with pelt price. This trend can be seen in Figure 11, where in 2013, the R2 marten harvest reached its all-time high of 696 marten and the marten pelt price was also at its all-time fur market high of \$85.92 a pelt. The number of successful trappers harvesting marten in 2013 was also at an all-time high of 87, which is 48 trappers more than the long-term average of 39 trappers (1994-2023 average). From 2014 to 2022, marten pelt prices and harvest dropped significantly from the high seen in 2013. In 2023, marten pelt prices increased to \$52.44 per pelt and 226 marten were harvested

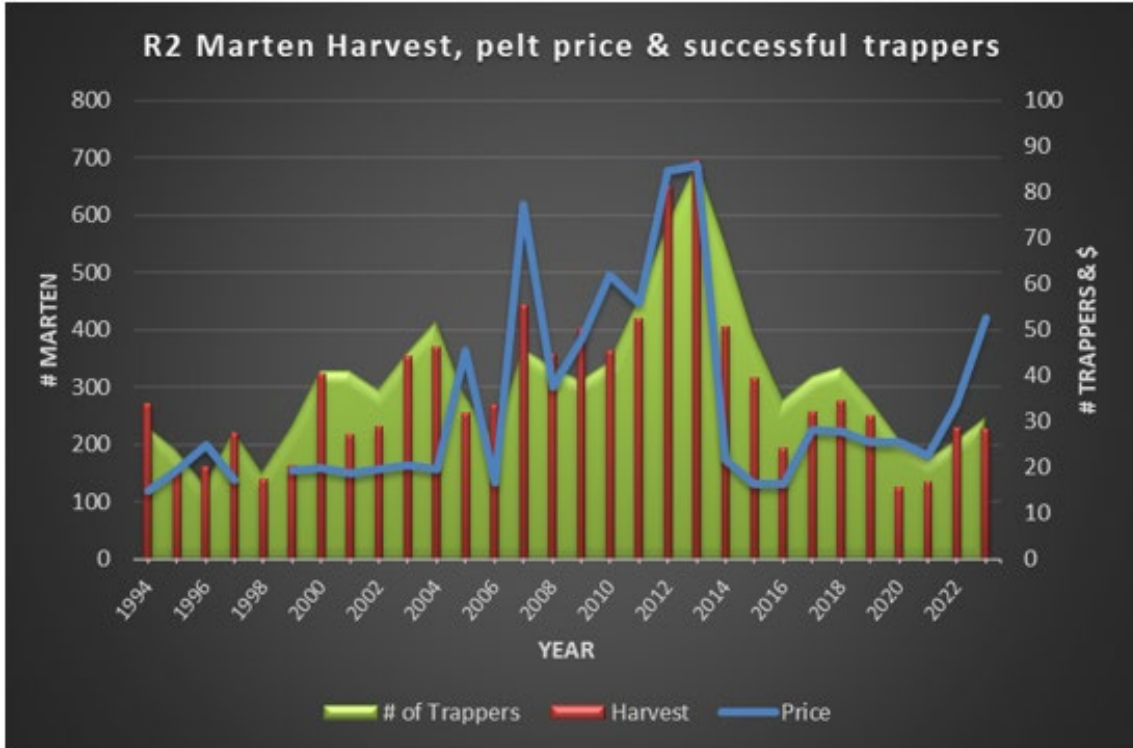


Figure 11. Region 2 marten harvest, number of successful trappers and fur price 1994-2023. by 31 trappers. Trapper effort and marten harvest in the coming 2024 trapping season may increase due to the recent increase in pelt price.

R2 Marten Quota Recommendations 2024: No change. Marten harvest is largely driven by pelt price and future harvest is likely to resemble recent years with relatively low to moderate harvest based on current prices.



FISHER

Fisher Quota and Regulations: Fisher are defined as a furbearer species in Montana. A trapping license is required to legally harvest a fisher. The trapping season opens on December 1st and closes when the quota is reached, or on February 15th. R2 has a quota of 5 fishers and a subquota of 1 female. If a female is caught the season is closed even if the overall quota of 5 hasn't been met. In 2019, the R1 fisher quota was reduced to zero and remains in place in 2023. Trappers are required to report a harvest within 24 hours and present the pelt and carcass to FWP for tagging and collection.

Fisher Harvest: While fisher harvest historically occurred in R1 and R2, the fisher quota in R1 was reduced to zero after the 2018 season. R2 is now the only region with fisher harvest opportunity. In R2, fisher harvest often closes early with the harvest of a female and typically does not reach the quota of 5 individuals.

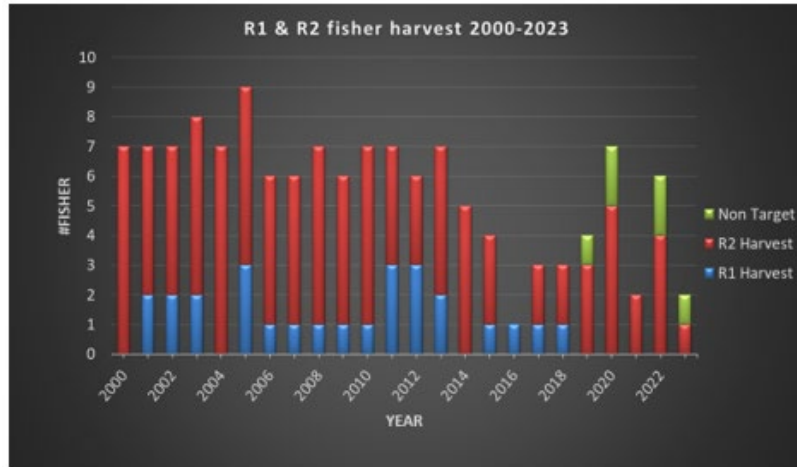


Figure 12. Fisher harvest and non-target captures in Regions 1 and 2 from 2000-2023.

From 2000-2023, the average harvest has been 4 fisher per year (Figure 12). In addition to harvest, one or two additional mortalities occur every year from non-target captures in marten or bobcat sets. The 2023 season closed quickly with the harvest of a female on December 5, 2023. One other fisher was incidentally trapped after the season had already closed.

Since 2000, roughly 115 fisher have been harvested in R2, 96 of those individuals have a known age. Of those, 66 are juveniles and yearlings (i.e., .5 years and 1.5 years) and 49 are 2.5 years old or mature adults. The oldest fisher harvested were a male and female that were both 8.5 years old (Figure 13).

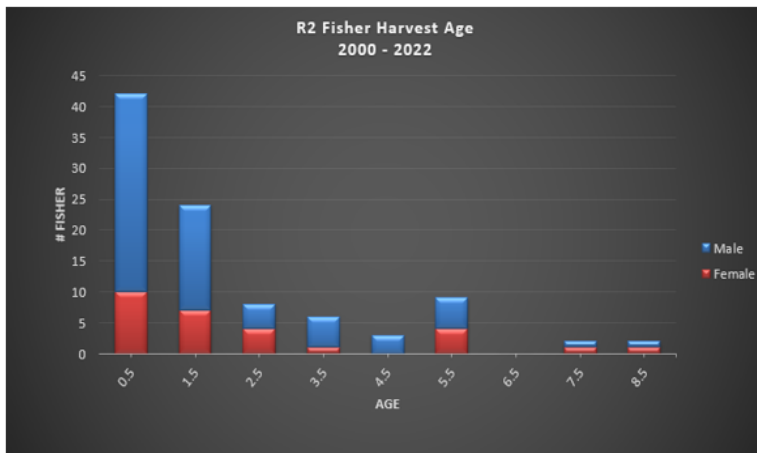


Figure 13. Region 2 number of harvested fisher by age and sex 2000-2022.

R2 Fisher Quota Recommendations 2024: No Change.

BEAVER, MINK & MUSKRAT

Regulations: Beaver, mink, and muskrat are defined as a furbearer species in Montana. A trapping license is required to trap all three species. The season opens on November 1st and closes on April 15th. There is no regional or personal quota. Reporting and pelt tagging is not required.

Harvest: Statewide and regional harvest data of Montana’s furbearers including beaver, mink and muskrat is monitored annually through the trapper harvest survey. Data collected from this mail survey is summarized annually by FWP’s Furbearer

Coordinator, Nathan Kluge, and is available on the FWP website (<https://fwp.mt.gov/hunt/trapping>).

R2 Beaver, Mink, & Muskrat Quota Recommendations 2024: No Change.

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