

## Group seeks ban on trapping

*By Jennifer McKee - 07/15/2009*

HELENA — Saying that trapping brutally kills animals, a Florence-based group wants Montana voters to ban wildlife trapping on all public lands.

Trappers, however, shot back that the group's efforts are based on whipped-up misinformation that neglects the role trapping plays in controlling wildlife numbers and in Montana culture.

The group, Footloose Montana, submitted a would-be ballot initiative to the Montana Secretary of State's office Wednesday that attempts to greatly restrict the acreage where Montana trappers can operate.

"I think trapping on public lands should be illegal," said Anja Heister, of Missoula, executive director of Footloose Montana.

Heister, a German native who moved to Missoula nine years ago, said the proposed law that would ban trapping on state and federally owned public lands.

However Greg Petesch, the Legislature's top lawyer, said that would be impossible. Montana cannot pass laws binding activities on federal lands, meaning the initiative would not apply to Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management and other federal lands, even if it were to pass voter approval in 2010.

The filing is the first step in Montana's initiative process. Next, state lawyers must analyze the proposed law. Finally, Footloose Montana must gather more than 24,000 signatures from registered Montana voters to qualify the measure for the 2010 ballot.

Heister said the all-volunteer group is hoping to gather about 35,000 signatures.

Trapping is a relatively small part of regulated wildlife taking in Montana. In 2008, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks sold more than 4,300 trapping licenses. The agency's Web site includes tips for trappers on how to avoid trapping non-target species and how to interact with the public, many of whom have likely never met a trapper before.

Tom Barnes, a Dillon native and president of the Montana Trappers Association, said the numbers of trappers still left in Montana is small, but they carry on hundreds of years of important tradition.

"It may be a cliché in this day and age, but the trapper and the mountain man made Montana," he said. "Our heritage needs to be preserved. It's like the hunting and fishing heritage. If you're from Montana, you grew up hunting and fishing. Lots of us grew up trapping." Heister said she became involved in the anti-trapping issue in 2002 after she saw a coyote run across the cross country ski trail, its leg caught in a trap.

"There was blood everywhere," she said.

A few years later, her co-worker watched as her German shepherd, Annie, stepped into baited trap near a Bitterroot trailhead. The woman was unable to free the dog and "ended up just curling up next to her and petting her and waiting for the dog to die." Barnes said that while dogs sometimes do inadvertently

step into traps, such accidents are very rare. Trapping is forbidden within 1000 feet of a trailhead and along trails. Additionally, he said, trappers have agreed to set aside chunks of ground to be free of any traps so hikers and skiers can recreate there with no fear that they or their dogs are in any danger.

"I don't want to catch your dog; I don't want to catch my dog," he said. "It's not like we're barbarians out there trying to catch somebody's dog in a trap." Heister said the initiative would not apply to trapping on private lands and would not include trapping for scientific and public health and safety purposes, provided government employees do the trapping.

Trapping in Montana involves 17 animals, including nine official "fur bearing" animals for which Fish, Wildlife and Parks sets trapping limits and seasons, as well as six other animals classified predators, for which there are no limits and trapping seasons, and two non-game animals, according to information from the Montana Trapper's Association.

"Trapping is a tool to control animal populations," he said. "It's no different than the general hunting season for deer and elk." He said his group is taking Footloose Montana's challenge seriously, even as it believes the justification for their initiative is "baseless."