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Advisory Announcement

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Nelchina Caribou Hunts RC561, RC562, and CC001 closed by Emergency Order

(Glennallen) – Regulatory Year 2023-2024 (RY23) hunting seasons for Nelchina caribou Tier I hunts RC561, RC562, and CC001 are closed by emergency order (R4-01-23). Permits for these hunts will not be distributed. Households are released from Unit 13 hunting restrictions that are associated with their RC561, RC562, or CC001 permit. Community subsistence moose hunt participants are now eligible to hunt caribou outside of the CM300 hunt area but are not released from the remaining CM300 permit conditions.

The Nelchina caribou herd (NCH) experienced severe winter conditions in the winter of 2021/22, followed by a late spring, which coincided with late migration and a late calving period for the herd. Overwinter mortality of adults and calves was high, resulting in a population decline and low recruitment of 2021 calves into the population.

The Alaska Department of Fish and Game's summer 2022 estimate for the Nelchina herd was approximately 21,000 caribou, which is well below the fall population objectives of 35,000–40,000 caribou. In the spring of 2022, monitoring of the herd on the calving grounds suggested that productivity and neonate survival was low. The summer composition survey observed only 31 calves per 100 cows. A surplus of bulls was available for harvest based on summer composition, and state hunts were held with bull-only bag limits and limited quotas for each hunt. The fall population estimate was 17,433 animals with a bull-to-cow ratio of 26 bulls per 100 cows, and a calf-to-cow ratio of 16 calves per 100 cows. All winter seasons were closed for state hunts by emergency order. Federal subsistence hunt administrators did not restrict fall or winter season dates or bag limits and issued permits for harvest of either sex.

The 2022 NCH fall migration coincided with swollen creeks and rivers that were difficult to cross and up to 18" of snow falling along the migration route. Roughly half of the collared calves of the year, representing the already small 2022 cohort, did not survive the fall migration.

Deep snow occurred again in the winter of 2022/23, as well as another late spring, late migration, and late calving period. Overall, adult cow survival was still low but better than the previous winter. Additionally, 87% of the collared 2022 calves died prior to spring.

Conditions on the calving grounds in spring of 2023 were very similar to the spring of 2022, with poor productivity and poor neonate survival. Calf-to-cow ratios for summer and fall composition counts are expected to be similar to those observed in 2022. The very small 2021, 2022, and 2023 cohorts will impact future productivity of the herd.

Productivity and recruitment for 2022 and 2023 was not sufficient to grow the herd with the higher-than-normal levels of mortality that have been observed. The herd is below objectives and will remain below objectives in RY23. No harvestable surplus of caribou is expected this year which means no state hunt opportunities can be provided. Based on available data, the NCH cannot meet the Amount Necessary for Subsistence (600–1,000 caribou), which would be required for RC561, RC562, and CC001 seasons to open.

For conservation of the herd, no state Nelchina caribou hunts will occur in fall or winter for the 2023/24 season, which will release Tier I and Community Subsistence Hunt (CSH) Caribou permit holders and household members from the Unit 13 stipulations associated with their NCH permit. Federal hunt administrators have been advised to cancel NCH hunts in Unit 13 and a similar recommendation will be made to Unit 12 NCH federal hunt administrators.

Population and composition surveys for the NCH will be conducted early to mid-July. This information will be used to determine if harvestable surplus might be anticipated for the 2024–2025 (RY24) hunting season.

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