

**FALL HUNTING IN GAME MANAGEMENT UNIT 23:**

**ASSESSMENT OF ISSUES AND  
PROPOSAL FOR A PLANNING PROCESS**



*prepared by*

Cynthia Jacobson

Alaska Department of Fish & Game  
Division of Wildlife Conservation

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## Introduction

Fall hunting in Game Management Unit (GMU) 23 has been the subject of conflict since the early 1980s, particularly among local residents, non-local hunters and commercial operators. Local residents are concerned about increasing numbers of hunters and lack of respect by some hunters for traditional values and practices; non-local hunters want access to public land and to have quality hunting experiences; and commercial operators want to maintain their ability to offer quality experiences to clients and to operate profitable businesses.

This document includes: a brief background about hunting in Unit 23, with emphasis on conflicts among user groups; an assessment of the current management environment based on qualitative interviews conducted with a variety of key stakeholders; the outcome of a planning group meeting to consider ideas for addressing issues; and an update on where we are currently with the planning process.

## Background

Unit 23 comprises the Kotzebue Sound, Chukchi Sea and Arctic Ocean drainages from and including the Goodhope River drainage to Cape Lisburne. The majority of land (56%) is under federal ownership. Federal land includes Kobuk Valley National Park, Noatak National Preserve, the southwestern section of the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve, Cape Krusenstern National Monument, the Selawik National Wildlife Refuge, portions of the Alaska Maritime Refuge, and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) property. The remaining land is owned by the Northwest Alaska Native Association (NANA), Kikiktagruk Inupiat Corporation (KIC), the Northwest Arctic Borough or the State of Alaska.

Hunting for both subsistence and recreation is a central activity in Unit 23. Many local people rely on game, primarily caribou and moose, for food throughout the year. Commercial operators, including guides, air taxi operators, transporters and lodges rely on access to Unit 23 for their livelihoods. Non-local hunters, both Alaskan and nonresident, enjoy the opportunity to hunt a variety of big game and furbearers in the Unit.

User conflicts in Unit 23 occur primarily during the fall hunting season, approximately late August through September. Fall is the peak period for non-local hunting activity because moose and caribou have fully developed antlers free of velvet, weather is mild compared to winter, access to the field is not restricted by snow and ice, and a strong fall hunting tradition has developed in the western culture. Fall is also a critical time for local subsistence users to harvest meat, fish and berries – activities that are defining characteristics of most indigenous cultures in Alaska. Also, local residents hunt during this time because they have traditionally shifted subsistence harvests from fish and birds to moose and caribou during fall; the animals have the largest reserves of meat and fat, and they are able to hunt the rivers by boat. As a result, more hunters – both local and non-local – and more commercial operators are in the field in Unit 23 during fall than at any other time of year. This occurs despite liberal seasons for caribou (no closed season for bulls), brown bears (10 months), black bears (no closed season), wolves (almost nine months) and some resident moose hunts (four months for bulls under a state registration hunt and eight months under federal regulations).

In addition to this compression of hunters and commercial activities temporally, they are also compressed spatially. The first spatial concentration of non-local hunters and commercial operators occurs in Kotzebue, the largest community within Unit 23. Most hunters who visit Unit 23 arrive and depart, along with their gear, trophies and meat, via several airlines at the Kotzebue airport (although they also access the unit via Galena, Bettles and Fairbanks). In addition to airline service, food, lodging and fuel are also available in Kotzebue. As a result, many guides and transporters who use airplanes for transportation base their operations at the airport.

Hunters—both local and non-local—are also spatially compressed in the field. Local residents hunt primarily by boat during the fall and, as a result, are limited to major river corridors. The high cost of gas combined with limited employment further restricts them to areas near the community where they live. In contrast, most commercial operators and non-local hunters access hunting sites using airplanes. Although airplane-based hunters are less restricted to major river corridors than local hunters, the rivers offer large gravel bars for wheeled planes and deep water for floatplanes, making them attractive to non-local users as well. Demand for access by guides, transporters and private individuals exceeds supply even in areas far removed from major river corridors. Guides and their clients are further restricted to areas for which the guide is registered. As commercial activity and numbers of visiting hunters increase, there is increasing contact between the various user groups, exceeding the threshold of tolerance of some for competition over the best places to hunt, airplane activity, direct human contact in the field, and the evidence of camps.

In 1984, tensions between locals and non-locals were growing, and were brought to the attention of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Unit 23 Area Biologist David James. Concerns were due in large part to increasing air traffic, particularly in the Noatak area (see Attachment A for a detailed history). In 1988, the Board of Game (BOG) attempted to address local concerns and minimize conflict by establishing a Controlled Use Area (CUA) from August 20 to September 20 along the main stem of the Noatak River—roughly 5% of the Noatak River drainage—in order to separate hunters who used boats and those who used airplanes to access the area. Due to continuing concerns in the area, the geographic area of the CUA was approximately doubled by the BOG in 1994 - 1995, but the time period was reduced to August 25 to September 15. Conflicts within the CUA were substantially reduced, but other problems may have emerged (e.g., increased ATV use).

Continuing concerns regarding Unit 23 spurred ADF&G to direct funding and attention toward addressing user conflicts. In 1999, ADF&G spearheaded the first in a series of meetings attended by government and public stakeholders. Some progress toward resolution was made, with participating stakeholders agreeing that Unit 23 could not absorb additional hunters without intensifying conflicts and reducing quality of hunting. They also identified the Squirrel River drainage and upper Kobuk River drainage as the two most problematic portions of the Unit with regard to user conflicts. However, in the course of these meetings (total of five meetings in 1999 and 2000), few concrete recommendations were agreed upon, and some key stakeholders, particularly transporters, believed that the process was biased (e.g. due to conflicts of interest, non-neutral facilitator).

Since 2000, other strategies and efforts have been made to address user conflicts in Unit 23. For example, the National Park Service and Northwest Arctic Borough held meetings, that primarily involved agency staff based in Kotzebue and local government organizations, to identify specific components of user conflicts. The Northwest Arctic Borough adopted

permitting requirements, and the BOG established regulations to strengthen salvage requirements for moose and caribou meat to reduce waste. In 2005, the Big Game Commercial Services Board (BGCSB) was reestablished to regulate guides and transporters throughout Alaska, providing another forum for addressing some Unit 23 issues. Furthermore, ADF&G in cooperation with other agencies, widely distributed a poster on Unit 23 meat salvage requirements and local/cultural concerns. An on-line non-local hunter orientation focused on care of meat and cultural issues in Unit 23 was implemented in 2007 and then converted to a pamphlet as well.

In 2006 and 2007, reported user conflicts were fewer than in past years. Possible reasons for the decline are: 1) reduction of the nonresident caribou bag limit from five to two and then to one, where it is currently. That decision, in combination with the recent restrictions on moose hunting (i.e. drawing permit required for nonresidents), likely reduced the number of nonresident hunters in the area; 2) increased state and federal enforcement in the Unit during fall 2006; and 3) decreased presence of two high-volume commercial operators. Although complaints were fewer in these two years, ADF&G and other governmental agencies, the BOG, and the BGCSB remain concerned about real, perceived and potential user conflicts in Unit 23.

## Methods

Prior to initiating stakeholder interviews, Cindi Jacobson, ADF&G Planner, met with Jim Dau, Unit 23 Area Biologist, to discuss the history of conflicts in Unit 23, the current management environment, ADF&G's interests and concerns regarding the area, and to generate names of potential interviewees. In July 2006, Cindi visited Kotzebue and interviewed ADF&G and federal agency staff, local government and tribal representatives, and other stakeholders (see a list of interviewees by category). In September 2006, Cindi returned to Kotzebue and interviewed guides and hunters. From July to December 2006, telephone interviews were conducted with transporters and village residents. Due to inconsistent telephone service in the villages and unusable phone numbers, Cindi was only able to contact residents in eight of the 11 villages in the Unit. The purpose of the interviews were to gain insight: 1) regarding the nature of key issues and concerns about hunting in Unit 23 from the perspectives of the stakeholders most affected by management of the GMU; 2) public perception of management options for the area; and 3) stakeholders' levels of interest and support should ADF&G initiate a public involvement effort to address issues in GMU 23. Interview responses provided the basis for an assessment of the management environment in Unit 23 and identified factors to consider in determining whether and how to initiate a public process to assist in the management of the area.

## Results

The following is a summary of responses to the three primary questions asked, organized by stakeholder category.

### **Major issues regarding hunting in Unit 23 during the fall season**

#### Village residents

Generally, village residents interviewed thought that problems regarding non-local hunters had decreased in 2006. The concerns expressed were primarily about perceived impacts to caribou (e.g., disrupting migration pattern, killing too many bulls, harassment) and how these

may impede locals' ability to get food. In addition, residents were concerned that many non-local hunters were insensitive to Native culture and values (e.g., offered bad meat, left meat behind or let it spoil). The impacts of global warming on wildlife was raised by some interviewees.

#### Local opinion leaders (e.g., NANA region members of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group, local advisory committee members, and Elders)

Local opinion leaders expressed concerns similar to those of the village residents. Generally, they were concerned about impacts to caribou and that local beliefs and values were not being respected.

#### Non-local hunters

The majority of hunters interviewed were non-residents. As can be expected, these hunters were fairly uninformed about issues in the area and were primarily concerned about their quality of experience. For example, most hunters complained that there were not enough facilities (e.g., meat processing plant, restaurants) to accommodate them, and some said that because of that, they would not return to the area unless conditions improved. Many hunters expressed concerns about the quality of service provided by their transporters (e.g., being taken to poor hunting areas, not being picked up in a timely manner) and the weather. Only a small minority of hunters interviewed mentioned being treated poorly by local residents.

#### NANA and Maniilaq

Interviewees from NANA and Maniilaq were pragmatic about resolving user conflicts. They recognized that non-local hunters would continue to come to the Unit and were interested in finding fair solutions to manage problems.

#### Guides

Guides expressed concern about the laws and regulations under which hunting is managed in Unit 23, and how the management system impacts their businesses. For example, it was suggested that the moose permit system favors large volume operations; the bag limit on caribou for nonresidents is too low; and that lack of consistency among land and resource management agencies is confusing and problematic. Some guides expressed concerns about the number of transporters that come to the Unit, and that transporters were not held to the same standards as guides. Many interviewees were interested in the availability of facilities for handling game meat and said that their clients would be willing to pay for use of refrigerator/freezer space, as well as to have meat processed and shipped from Kotzebue. A minority of guides noted that they had had problems with local people in Kotzebue. Some guides expressed a lack of confidence in the way that ADF&G is managing game (i.e., based on non-biological factors), and concerns about how troopers enforce game regulations.

#### Local government (including the Kotzebue IRA)

The local government representatives interviewed shared concerns about sport versus subsistence hunting, respect for wildlife or local cultural beliefs, and the impacts of growing numbers of non-local hunters that likely have no interest in or tie to the area. Many of the

concerns mentioned by local government representatives were in regards to problems in Kotzebue itself (e.g., rotting meat on the airport tarmac) versus problems in the field. These interviewees thought that issues related to fall hunting were of considerable importance and needed to be addressed as soon as possible.

### Transporters

Transporters' concerns were deep rooted and included perceptions of local intolerance (e.g., "locals do not like us and treat us poorly") and equity issues (e.g. "federal land is for everyone," "unfair advantages for local people"). Most transporters also expressed distrust of ADF&G and other government agencies and expressed frustration that decisions were being made based on "politics" versus "biology." The majority of transporters interviewed did not consider the increasing number of hunters in the area to be a factor that would impact their businesses.

### State and federal employees

State and federal employees raised concerns about conflicts between sport and subsistence users and generally thought that these issues should be addressed. It was recognized that land ownership and differences in laws and authority is confusing for the public. Some people suggested that the perception of problems may be exacerbated by the fact that a large number of people descend on Kotzebue during a very short period of time and that some of those problems could likely be addressed by spreading hunters out in space and time. Also, concerns were raised about the impact of climate change on the caribou herd.

## **Recommendations for addressing issues**

### Village residents

Suggestions from village residents focused on ensuring priority for locals (e.g., no-fly zones between September and October, non-local season should start later, minimizing number of permits issued). In addition, some residents thought that non-local hunters could make a concerted effort to benefit local residents by offering good quality meat and hiring local guides.

### Local opinion leaders

This group of interviewees was highly motivated to solve problems in the Unit. Solutions focused on addressing impacts to local residents. For example, it was suggested that local guides should be used and that non-local guides be required to receive education about land ownership, proper care of meat, and traditional practices when hunting caribou. Other solutions included finding ways to distribute hunters on the land and increasing regulations on non-local hunters.

### Non-local hunters

Although non-local hunters were not as familiar with the conflicts in Unit 23 as the other groups, they were able to offer some solutions to minimize problems from their perspectives. Some suggested that requirements for transporters and guides be increased to ensure better customer service (e.g., require them to carry more meat or have to submit forms when they

donate meat). In addition, hunters suggested that they would pay for increased and better facilities in Kotzebue, particularly for handling meat.

### NANA and Maniilaq

These interviewees offered a few concrete recommendations: Maintain a one caribou limit, delay season start date, and educate non-local hunters.

### Local government, including IRA

Recommendations from this group were focused on increasing restrictions for non-local users, primarily transporters. In particular, interviewees were interested in finding ways to decrease the number of hunters using the Unit and to help ensure that those who do use the area respect local norms.

### Guides

Similar to hunters, guides thought that Kotzebue should provide facilities to accommodate hunters and to bring economic benefit to the community. Some people suggested that there should be increased regulations for transporters/air taxis (e.g., limit aircraft in the Squirrel River drainage). Others suggested hunter orientation should be required. One person suggested that an exclusive guide area system similar to that used in Kodiak should be instituted.

### Transporters

Recommendations from transporters were wide ranging. Their suggestions included: giving transporters exclusive areas; requiring that they use guides; moving hunters away from Kotzebue; offering more amenities to hunters; employing a limited entry point system; encouraging more hunters to come to the Unit; and ensuring ADF&G sticks to its mission (i.e., managing wildlife versus dealing with social issues).

### State and federal employees

State and federal employees identified a need to increase restrictions on users of the area, both local and non-local. Ideas included using a quota system similar to that used in commercial fishing, limiting the number of contracts awarded, increasing enforcement, and working with NANA to facilitate the ability of locals to benefit from hunting.

## **Importance of involving stakeholders in the development of ideas and recommendations for Unit 23**

### Village residents

Village residents interviewed thought that it was a good idea for people “to communicate and work on problems together.”

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### Local opinion leaders

Similar to local government representatives, local opinion leaders were supportive of a public process but were concerned that “talking hadn’t done much so far.” Some interviewees stressed the importance of involving representatives from each village.

### Hunters

Generally, hunters thought that involving users in problem solving was important. Most interviewees were out-of-state hunters who had little investment in the area beyond their recent hunting trips.

### NANA and Maniilaq

Interviewees expressed support for implementing a public process. One interviewee stated “The ‘us’ and the ‘them’ need to become the ‘we’.”

### Local government, including IRA

Local government representatives seemed frustrated at the lack of attention paid to their concerns and wanted to see some action taken. It seemed that these interviewees were cautiously supportive of public involvement, and some thought that measures should be taken to limit the number of hunters in Unit 23.

### Guides

Support for embarking on a public involvement process was mixed among guides. Some guides thought that the issues were not significant enough to warrant a public process and others thought that too many people would need to be involved in order for it to be representative. Other guides noted that they would be interested and willing to participate in meetings.

### Transporters

Most of the transporters thought that it would be a good idea to gather input from the public, but they wanted to make sure that the process was transparent. Some expressed concerns about fairness and bias in previous public involvement efforts.

### State and federal agencies

State and federal staff were interested in engaging the public in discussions about issues and ideas for resolution. Most interviewees conveyed the importance of collaboration among agencies, particularly in light of various planning efforts being considered by the different agencies.



## Summary

The following is a summary of the interview results:

- A diversity of issues and concerns were identified regarding hunting in Unit 23.
- Local residents, including local governmental officials, identified user conflicts as a significant and urgent problem in need of resolution. The majority of concerns focused on the increasing number of hunters coming to the Unit, behavior of transporters and hunters when they are in the area, and disrespect for local cultural values and beliefs by some parties.
- Non-local stakeholders, particularly transporters, were less likely than local stakeholders to consider user conflicts a problem. Both transporters and guides suggested that improving amenities in Kotzebue (e.g., meat processing/shipping facilities, refrigerator/freezer units to keep meat cold) would help to minimize problems.
- In general, transporters were concerned about ensuring equity in access to game and in decisions about allocation that are based on “social” or “political” rather than biological considerations. Many transporters questioned ADF&G’s trustworthiness. Transparency of the process is key to securing transporter participation.
- Many of the concerns expressed represented considerable value and cultural differences among stakeholders. These issues are not likely to be resolved in a public, consensus-based process.
- Some areas of potential agreement exist (e.g., ways to minimize problems in Kotzebue, education about local beliefs and customs), but expectations for resolution via a public process must be reasonable.
- A fair and comprehensive public planning process would be costly.
- The various agency planning processes should be carefully coordinated to benefit each other and to avoid confusion among the public.
- Establishing support for the process from key decision makers at all levels is imperative.

### Outcome of May 2007 Planning Group meeting

On May 11, 2007, ADF&G convened a group of key individuals to discuss possibilities for minimizing user conflicts regarding fall hunting in Game Management Unit 23. Meeting attendees were: LeeAnne Ayres (USFWS), Colin Brown (BGCSB), Jim Dau (ADF&G), Mike Fleagle (FSB), Kim Franklin (NAB), George Helfrich (USNPS), Shelly Jacobson (BLM), Victor Karmun (RAC and Kotzebue Sound), Steve Machida (ADF&G), Caleb Pungowiyi (Maniilaq), Walter Sampson (NANA), Pete Schaffer (Kotzebue Sound and AC), Ron Somerville (BOG), Alex Whiting (KIRA/NVOK), Helen Clough (USF&WS), Roger Delaney (BLM), Adrienne Lindholm (NPS), and Homer Wells (NWAB). Invited but unable to attend were: Ted Spraker (BOG, BGCSB), Raymond Stoney (Chair, WACHWG) Roy Ashenfelter (Vice Chair, WACHWG), and Chris Milles (DNR, Fairbanks).

During the meeting, the group discussed issues and concerns regarding GMU 23 and the need to work together on ways to address problems. Participants agreed that the timing was right for a cooperative effort, particularly because the federal agencies are interested in obtaining public input to facilitate their respective, future planning processes.

The group discussed the merits of the various types of planning approaches (i.e., ranging from a full-blown comprehensive public process to a smaller scale, focused effort) available to address issues in Unit 23. Ron Somerville suggested that sophisticated time and area zoning concepts might, if coordinated, provide for maximum use by the general public and provide reasonable opportunity for local subsistence users to get their caribou. Mike Fleagle suggested that the working group model would likely be a good approach, and the group agreed. The general design would consist of the following elements:

- A group comprised of agency representatives/decision makers/opinion leaders, likely the participants at the meeting (including those who were unable to attend) and a few more people to represent missing interests (e.g., a DNR representative).
- The geographic scope would be broad (GMU 23), but the charge would be narrow (see below).
- The group would have a sunset date of two to three years post the first meeting date.

The following purpose and objectives were agreed to conceptually:

**Purpose:** to minimize user conflicts resulting from increasing numbers of hunters in GMU23.

**Objectives:**

- Determine the social carrying capacity for areas in which user conflicts exist within GMU23;
- Minimize the detrimental impacts to natural resources;
- Maximize the benefits to the public, where possible;
- Protect the way of life and the cultural values of the local people;
- Ensure the quality of experience for hunters; and
- Ensure equality among commercial service operators.

**Consensus agreement:** Participants would take the idea of a working group including conceptual purpose and objectives, to their respective agencies and groups to establish necessary support.

### **Update to February, 2008**

After the May, 2007 meeting, each of the members secured support from his or her agency or group. Jan Caulfield, Sheinberg Associates, has been hired to manage (i.e., facilitate and coordinate) the project with oversight from ADF&G. She and ADF&G staff will travel to Kotzebue in February to talk to folks and lay the groundwork for the first meeting, slated for April (still working on dates). Interim activities include, drafting a charter for the group, identifying holes in membership, developing a public outreach/communication plan.

Currently, \$50,000 (state FY 08 Capital Budget), \$45,000 (agreement with USFWS, three year period) and \$39,900 (agreement with BLM, three year period) has been raised for this project. The USNPS has verbally agreed to fund the project as well.

**Table: Interviewees**

<b>Interviewee type</b>	<b>Number of interviewees</b>
Guides	9
Transporters	12
Local government, including IRA	3
NANA and Maniilaq	2
Local opinion leaders (e.g., members of the advisory committee, the WACHWG, and/or elders)	5
Non-local hunters (interviewed on-site)	18
Village residents	12
BOG members	2
BGCSB members	2
State and federal employees	5

For a copy of this report, please contact Mark Burch at 907-267-2387 or [mark.burch@alaska.gov](mailto:mark.burch@alaska.gov)