



NEWS RELEASE



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2021 GMU 2 Wolf Season Announced

CRAIG, Alaska – Biologists with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), in cooperation with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), will close the state and Federal hunting and trapping seasons for wolf in Game Management Unit (GMU) 2 (Unit 2 in the Federal regulations) at 11:59 pm on December 15, 2021. State and Federal trapping seasons will open November 15, 2021.

Background

Beginning in 2019, the wolf harvest management strategy on Prince of Wales and associated islands, collectively known as GMU 2, changed from a harvest quota calculated as a percentage of the most recent population estimate to one where season length is annually adjusted to achieve a level of harvest that will maintain the wolf population within a sustainable fall population objective range of 150–200 wolves as established by the Alaska Board of Game. ADF&G worked with the USFS, Fish and Game Advisory Committees, the Alaska Board of Game, the Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council, and trappers to develop this new strategy that provides trappers with the flexibility and responsibility they desired while sustainably managing harvest of this wolf population.

The current harvest management strategy is based on annual estimates of the abundance of GMU 2 wolves. Dense forest cover makes aerial surveys impractical, so ADF&G, with support from the USFS and Hydaburg Cooperative Association (HCA), estimates wolf abundance in GMU 2 using a DNA-based mark-recapture technique. In fall 2020, ADF&G collected wolf DNA samples within the same large, northern and central Prince of Wales Island study area used in 2014-2019. ADF&G again collaborated with HCA to monitor an additional study area adjacent to the southern boundary of ADF&G's study area. This collaboration effectively expands the area sampled to nearly 80% of Prince of Wales Island and over 60% of the land area of GMU 2.

Interpreting Estimates and Harvest

ADF&G estimates the fall population of wolves in GMU 2 by analyzing the number, movements, and recaptures of individual wolves identified through DNA from samples collected from hair traps and harvested wolves. For fall 2020 ADF&G estimated the GMU 2 population at 386 wolves (point estimate) with high confidence that the actual

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number of wolves in GMU 2 prior to the fall 2020 hunting and trapping seasons was within the 95% confidence interval range, 320 to 472 wolves. This is the most current population estimate. All estimates involve uncertainty. Therefore, we present each GMU 2 wolf population estimate as a point estimate within a range of plausible values (95% confidence interval) which describe that uncertainty. Within that range of plausible values, the point estimate is the value most likely to be correct given the data collected that year.

The fall 2020 population estimate of 386 wolves was higher than expected considering it followed a reported harvest of 164 wolves from a fall 2019 population estimated at 316 (95% CI: 250, 398) wolves. However, other information also indicates that the GMU 2 wolf population remains robust. Numbers of hair samples collected at ADF&G's hair traps and numbers of unique individual wolves identified through DNA were similar in 2019 and 2020. Rate of trapper catch (wolves harvested per week) in both years was also similar. With only 68 wolves reported harvested in 2020, ADF&G concludes that the fall 2020 population estimate is plausible and in fall 2021 the GMU 2 wolf population remains productive and resilient.

Sealing requirements

In March 2021 the Alaska Board of Game changed state regulations for sealing wolves harvested in GMU 2, and those changes will be in effect during the upcoming wolf hunting and trapping seasons. Wolves taken in GMU 2 must be sequentially numbered or marked by the hunter or trapper, the hunter or trapper must call the ADF&G Ketchikan office at (907) 225-2475 within 7 days of take to report the date and location of take, and all hides must be sealed within 15 days of take. These regulations were designed to provide more precise data for managers to use when calculating population estimates.

Federally qualified users harvesting wolves on Federally managed land in Unit 2 may also seal wolves under Federal subsistence regulations. Federal regulations require wolves harvested in Unit 2 to be sealed within 30 days of the end of the season. Federal regulations do not apply to wolves harvested on municipal, private, or state lands including tidelands. Trappers sealing wolves under Federal regulations are also encouraged to provide precise information on the date and location where each individual wolf was harvested.

Fall 2021 Harvest Management

Setting harvest season length involves considering a variety of biological factors and regulatory guidance. Although ADF&G's GMU 2 wolf population estimates have always been reasonable and consistent with the DNA collected, analysis of data from 2019 and 2020 suggests earlier estimates may have been biased low. Along with incremental improvements in capturing DNA from hair samples, in 2019 and 2020 ADF&G first had access to DNA from relatively large numbers of wolves harvested within the study area during the October-December study period. That DNA collected at sealing contributed to larger datasets available for the 2019 and 2020 population estimates and in part, appears responsible for higher estimates in those years. Fewer samples from harvested wolves available for earlier estimates may have biased those estimates low.

When setting the current fall population objective (150–200 wolves) the Alaska Board of Game referenced estimates from 2014 and 2015. If those estimates were biased low, the population objective in regulation may be set too low. Investigating potential bias in GMU 2 wolf population estimates is a top priority for ADF&G, but until we know more, managers will take a conservative approach to harvest management. The 2021 state and Federal trapping seasons for wolves in GMU 2 will be one month long (31 days), opening on November 15 and closing on December 15. State and Federal GMU 2 wolf hunting seasons will also close on Dec. 15, 2021. We believe a one-month trapping season offers substantial harvest opportunity while also ensuring that harvest will remain sustainable. We understand that GMU 2 hunters and trappers would prefer greater opportunity but considering the recent uncertainty about early population estimates and their influence on the current population objective, we believe a conservative approach is warranted.

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Please call the ADF&G Ketchikan area office at 907-225-2475 for more information. For more information from the U.S. Forest Service, please call District Ranger Mark Pentecost at 907-826-1600. Maps of Federal lands within GMU 2 are available at Forest Service offices. Maps and additional information on the Federal Subsistence Management Program can be found on the web at <http://www.doi.gov/subsistence/index.cfm>.

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