

**UNGULATE MANAGEMENT – REGION I  
GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS 1A and 3**

**REPORT TO THE ALASKA BOARD OF GAME  
MARCH 4, 2011**

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**Background:**

Deer numbers in Game Management Units (Unit) 1A and 3 are currently believed to be at relatively low levels and harvests have declined as well. Causes for the low numbers are believed to be a combination of factors, including a series of deep-snow winters, habitat changes associated with clearcut logging, and predation. Deer in both these Units have been identified as positive for Intensive Management (IM; providing high levels of deer for human consumption). At present, deer in both units are below the established IM population and harvest objectives, though a review of these objectives may be warranted given historic data and ongoing changes to the habitat that is lowering the carrying capacity for deer. Currently, the population and harvest objectives are 15,000 and 700, respectively, in Unit 1A and 15,000 and 900, respectively, in Unit 3.

The three actions identified in IM to address low ungulate numbers are to: 1) lower seasons and bag limits, 2) enhance habitat, or 3) reduce predation. Thus far, we have only implemented one of these possible actions (changes to seasons and bag limits). Within parts of these areas deer seasons have been shortened over time and harvest has been limited to bucks-only in response to low deer numbers and poor hunter success. Deer seasons and bag limits in Unit 3 remain among the most restrictive in the region. We have not to this point enacted any habitat enhancement efforts; however, we have recently lengthened the wolf hunting season in these areas in an attempt to allow for increased harvest.

During the November 2010 SE Alaska Board of Game meeting, this situation was discussed and two proposals were adopted to begin addressing low deer numbers. One was a shortening of the bucks-only season in Unit 1A to take some of the hunting pressure and associated stress off deer and a second proposal was adopted to lengthen the wolf hunting season in Units 1A, a part of 1B (west side of the Cleveland Peninsula), and 3. In addition to these steps, the Board suggested that the department consider further measures to enhance the deer population, including the possibility of hiring trappers to target wolves in specific areas within the units as a way to possibly reduce predation pressure on deer in those areas.

Subsequent to the Board meeting, Region I staff spent considerable time discussing the existing situation in Units 1A and 3, and factors limiting deer populations. Ultimately, staff agreed to a set of near-term action items believed to be most practical and responsive to the existing biological and social situation. These actions were vetted with and agreed to by HQ leadership.

**Considerations:**

- Although deer harvests have been below the IM harvest objectives in both Units 1A and 3 during the past few years, we don't consider there to be a biological emergency with deer in these areas at this time.
- We are unsure what role wolves, bears, habitat, and weather are contributing to the present low deer numbers.

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- Based on deer harvest survey data, deer harvests increased in Units 1A and 3 during 2009 (up from 147 in 2008 to 184 in 2009 in Unit 1A, and up from 376 in 2008 to 587 in 2009 in Unit 3<sup>a</sup>). Reports from hunters during 2010 suggest even more deer were observed and harvested during the most recent hunting season, though the harvest data for the 2010 season will not be available until spring, 2011.
- In Unit 1A, where deer numbers appear to be lowest and are of most concern, the wolf population does not appear to be as high as it was in the past, neither on the Cleveland Peninsula nor Gravina Island. Additionally, 5 wolves have already been harvested from Gravina this winter, which may be as much as half the existing population.
- Hunters have reported seeing an increased number of black bears in Unit 1A during the past year, further heightening the question about the relative contributions to deer mortality of black bears versus wolves.

### **Pursued Actions:**

- The Board lengthened the wolf hunting seasons, through May, in Units 1A, parts of 1B, and 3, and also shortened the deer hunting season (eliminated December) in Unit 1A. Expedited review of the extended wolf season will allow that regulation to take effect this spring (May 2011). We will monitor this extension to assess its affect on wolf harvests.
- We are working on a new deer population assessment method, using fecal DNA, to better evaluate and monitor regional deer populations. We will be initiating our second year of a research project on Chichagof Island and hope to be able to refine the method this year and implement the technique on a wider scale to help assess deer numbers across the region, particularly in areas of greatest concern. This technological development that is expected to allow us to better estimate deer numbers, which in turn will better enable us to measure and evaluate levels of success should we attempt to further enhance deer populations.
- We've initiated a project to assess deer habitat quality and quantity on the Cleveland Peninsula and Gravina Island using habitat sampling protocols. This is an effort that's been ongoing for about five years. The effort is anticipated to continue for at least two more years and will result in a better understanding of deer carrying capacity in these areas.
- Beginning in July 2011, we will discontinue the long-used deer harvest survey technique for assessing harvests and transition to a harvest ticket reporting system. With the advent of internet reporting, we are hopeful that the level of reporting will improve, along with the associated precision in estimating deer harvests on large- and small-landscape levels. We will also follow up deer harvest reports with surveys of unsuccessful hunters to provide fine-scale harvest estimates by geographic area, community, and residency.
- We are installing remote cameras on Gravina Island to get a better understanding of wolf and black bear numbers and distributions on the island. We are also considering other options such as capturing and radio-collaring a few wolves on the island to learn more about their distribution, pack sizes, numbers of packs, and interactions with deer and other wildlife.
- We will be continuing our efforts on Prince of Wales Island to assess causes of deer fawn mortality on that island. This will provide us with additional insight on the role and contribution of black bears and wolves to deer mortality, and the associated implications for regional deer populations and human harvests.
- We will continue to review proposed timber sales, offer insights on implications of habitat alterations to deer populations, and offer recommendations on how best to mitigate for deer populations and associated human deer harvests.

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<sup>a</sup> We recently learned that deer harvest reports for the 2008 hunting season were not returned from residents of Kake, so the 2008 reported harvest of 376 deer may have been as much as 130 below the actual Unit 3 deer harvest that year.