

PROPOSAL 37

5 AAC 92.108. Identified big game prey populations and objectives.

Reduce the harvest objective for deer in Unit 1A from 700 to 350–400 as follows:

Population	Finding	Population Objective	Harvest Objective
Deer			
GMU 1 (A)	Positive	15,000	<u>350–400</u> [700]

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? For the purposes of implementing AS 16.05.255(e) – (g), in 2000 the Alaska Board of Game (board) established intensive management (IM) population and harvest objectives for deer in Unit 1A at 15,000 deer and 700 deer, respectively (5 AAC 92.108). The IM population objective was developed by assessing the deer habitat carrying capacity within the unit and the local Area Biologist’s subjective assessment of where the unit’s deer population stood relative to carrying capacity at that time. The IM deer harvest objective was developed using the unit’s average estimated annual deer harvest from 1994-1998 plus an additional 10%.

Since the 1994–1998 period, significant declines in carrying capacity for deer, primarily resulting from transition of productive young clearcuts to closed canopy second-growth forest, have occurred. In years with deep snow loss of old-growth forest, wintering habitat can also result in high overwinter mortality. Wolves and black bears are present throughout the unit. Harvest of both species has remained fairly constant over the last two decades and we believe changes in habitat play a far greater role than predation in regulating deer abundance.

Although the Department of Fish and Game (department) does not have a reliable way to estimate deer abundance in the entire unit, trends in deer pellet-group counts suggest deer numbers have declined. Mean annual harvest for the last 20 years (regulatory year (RY) 1997 – RY2016) is only 294 deer with a peak of 508 deer in RY1998; well below the current 700-deer harvest objective. A decline in the number of hunters may also influence harvest. In 1993, there were an estimated 2,335 deer hunters in Ketchikan. That number dropped to 1,575 in 2001 and by 2003 it was only 1,167. This decline was influenced by the closing of the pulp mill in 1997 and changes in demographics for the Ketchikan area. Hunter effort in Unit 1A has also declined because more Ketchikan hunters are focusing their effort on nearby Prince of Wales Island. That island has more deer, greater road access, and daily ferry service from Ketchikan.

Currently, there is no viable way to significantly improve the value of second-growth forest as habitat for deer, particularly as winter habitat. Without higher deer numbers it is unlikely that hunters will make greater effort in Unit 1A. Consequently, it is also unlikely that the current harvest objective will be met in the foreseeable future. The department suggests that in such cases harvest objectives should be reasonably attainable and recommends reducing the annual harvest objective for deer in Unit 1A to 350–400 deer. Harvest exceeded 350 deer twice during RY2007 – RY2016.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game (HQ-F18-038)
