

Note: Proposal 196 was accepted by the Board of Game as an Agenda Change Request for consideration at the Statewide Regulations meeting originally scheduled for March 2021, and postponed to March 2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

PROPOSAL 196

5 AAC 85.025. Hunting seasons and bag limit for caribou.

Allow ADF&G to utilize a targeted hunt for registration caribou hunts (RC860 & RC867) in Units 20 and 25 as follows:

We would like to expand ADF&G's ability to utilize the targeted hunt option for the entire fall and winter registration hunts. A targeted hunt would allow ADF&G to stagger the number of hunters in all or a portion of the hunt area in order to better control the harvest, keep the quota from being exceeded, and reduce the need for emergency closure. This would be an important management tool to use if the Fortymile herd size and harvest quota are reduced, which will likely occur in fall 2021, and thousands of hunters who have previously participated in this hunt are likely to return.

A targeted hunt option would also ensure that Alaskans who participate in crowded portions of the hunt area will have a reasonable opportunity to harvest an animal before the hunt closes, allow ADF&G to meet management objectives, as well as spread out hunting pressure, which would reduce dangerous conditions resulting from congestion and minimize negative impacts on the land.

ADF&G already has the ability to administer a targeted hunt and utilizes this tool elsewhere in the state. The structure allows for equal access, as applicants do not have to be among the first to apply or compete with thousands of others in order to harvest an animal before the hunt closes. Additionally, hunters who apply for but do not receive a targeted permit would be allowed to hunt Fortymile caribou in less crowded locations of the hunt area under the normal fall and winter registration permit hunts.

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? The 2020 fall Fortymile caribou hunt along the Steese Highway resulted in an exceedingly high volume of hunters in a short period of time, which had a number of unintended negative consequences, including, detraction from the quality of the hunt, unsafe roadside and field conditions, and defacement of state and federal lands, and will ultimately limit equal access for all Alaskan's in future hunts. Specifically, it is unlikely that next years' fall quota and bag limit will remain the same (5,000 animals and two caribou of any sex respectively), however, there will be continued high levels of hunter interest and participation. As a result, all users will not have equal access or a reasonable expectation of success because of a probable early emergency closure.

Harvest objectives for the Fortymile caribou herd could easily be exceeded in one day under the current harvest options if the same number of hunters participate and the harvest quota decreases when the herd size is intentionally reduced.

When the harvest quota returns to normal levels, a targeted hunt would enable ADF&G to better control the harvest and keep the quota from being exceeded when large numbers of caribou congregate near roads and high numbers of hunters respond to these aggregations.

The board is not scheduled to review Fortymile caribou proposals until spring 2023. Without a targeted hunt option for ADF&G to use in the 2021 fall hunt and early portion of the winter hunt, allowable harvest that is otherwise biologically sustainable would be precluded if the harvest cannot be adequately controlled using only registration hunts.

In fall 2021 and 2022, the Fortymile caribou herd harvest quota will likely be significantly less than the 2020 quota. Hunter participation, however, is likely to remain high because of their experiences harvesting these caribou in recent years. The combination of a reduced harvest quota and increased hunter participation increases the likelihood that the 2021 harvest quota would be exceeded. Additionally, reduced birth rates, newborn survival, and calf survival to 1 year along with high mortality of adults in this herd would make it more difficult for the herd to recover from overharvest.

If the problem is not solved prior to the regular meeting cycle, Alaskan's will not have a reasonable expectation of success during the fall 2021 hunt because of a likely early emergency closure. Potential overharvest in fall 2021 could cause the population to be reduced below desired levels and, as a result, impact future harvest quotas.

Additionally, without tools to effectively manage the hunt, continued high levels of participation over short periods of time will lead to continued hunt degradation, persistence of a chaotic and dangerous atmosphere, and additional damage to the land.

The request is primarily biological in nature due to concerns of overharvest. Hunters have become increasingly accustomed to high quotas and bag limits, and large congregations of caribou readily accessible from major roadways. While the herd size has been intentionally reduced in 2020, it will become increasingly difficult for ADF&G to manage harvest within hunt quotas in the future. Such overharvest could cause the population to be reduced below desired levels, impacting future harvest quotas.

Although this request is primarily biological in nature, we are also asking that the board consider this proposal outside of the regular cycle to address wide community concern over the 2020 fall Fortymile caribou hunt, which has set an unfortunate precedent. Residents of Central were deeply troubled by what they observed during the hunt—a chaotic and dangerous atmosphere, unsportsmanlike behavior, and environmental damage. Similar concerns were publicized in the Fairbanks Daily News Miner, have been prolific on social media, and were discussed at a fall Fairbanks advisory committee meeting.

The board considered and passed a targeted hunt for the winter hunt only, at the spring 2012 Board of Game meeting as part of Proposal 192. This targeted hunt, however, is only an option during the December 1–March 31 portion of the winter hunt and is not available during the winter hunt opening in October or during the fall hunt, when the majority of hunters participate, overharvest is most likely, and safety concerns have been the greatest.

PROPOSED BY: Sarah Behr

(HQ-F20-ACR7)
