PROPOSAL 48

5 AAC 92.008. Harvest guideline levels.

Increase the Unit 2 wolf population objective as follows:

What solution do you recommend? In other words, if the board adopted your solution, what would the new regulation say?

For purposes of management of the named species, the department shall manage harvest by hunting and trapping as follows:

(1) Wolves: the annual harvest of wolves in Unit 2 should be managed to maintain the unit-wide population within a range of **200-300** [150-200] wolves;

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why?

Based on a retrospective evaluation, data suggests the early population estimates from regulatory year (RY) 2014 and RY2015 that the Board of Game (board) referenced when setting the current objective, likely underrepresented true population size. Research since the objective was set in 2019 also found the Unit 2 wolf population is reproductively isolated and has a high degree of inbreeding, which increases the potential for inbreeding depression. The available information indicates that sustainable management of Unit 2 wolves requires consideration of both demographic and genetic factors along with public sentiment and other information. Based on this information, the department is managing for a larger Unit 2 wolf population than the fall population objective of 150-200 wolves. Numerous research projects are ongoing; however, findings and new tools to inform management will not be available for the January 2026 Board of Game meeting in Wrangell. Until new information is available, maintaining the current larger population size is the best option to conserve existing genetic diversity and future management options. Therefore, the department proposes increasing the fall population objective range in Unit 2 from 150–200 to 200–300 wolves.

To help resolve long-standing management challenges and take advantage of advances that allowed annual population estimates, at the January 2019 Bord of Game meeting in Petersburg the department proposed fundamental changes to management of Unit 2 wolves. These changes included managing harvest opportunity, primarily trapping season length, to achieve a level of harvest that maintains the wolf population within a fall population objective range set by the board. The board recognized that the fall population objective would play a pivotal role and referenced the best available information to ensure consistency with the Alaska Constitution's mandate for sustained yield management. Board members also recognized that the population objective would require periodic review as new information became available.

Research since the 2019 Board of Game meeting found that wolves in Southeast Alaska have been generally isolated from other North American wolf populations for thousands of years with slowly declining genetic diversity. Within Southeast Alaska, the Unit 2 population is the most reproductively isolated, with the lowest genetic diversity and the highest degree of inbreeding. Although no signs of inbreeding depression have been detected, these conditions signal an increased level of risk for Unit 2 wolves.

Field and laboratory aspects of population genetics research are time-consuming. However, new tools for modeling likely outcomes of different management scenarios and for monitoring changes in genetic diversity and inbreeding should be available before the next Southeast Alaska Board of Game meeting in 2029. Until better information is available, as a conservation measure, the department proposes increasing the fall Unit 2 wolf population objective range to preserve future management options.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game (HQ-F25-045)

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