

Proposal 182

5 AAC 92.530. Management areas.

Establish a Central Arctic Management Area (CAMA) within Game Management Unit 26B as follows:

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

SUMMARY OF PROPOSAL

This proposal would create a new regulatory management area within Game Management Unit 26B called the Central Arctic Management Area (CAMA) and place nonresident caribou hunters NOT using a registered guide, and NOT accompanied by a resident second-degree of kindred, ON A DRAW TAG ALLOCATION within both the Central Arctic Management Area (CAMA) and the Dalton Highway Corridor Management Area (DHCMA).

Under this proposal:

- Up to 100 total nonresident draw permits would be issued annually (DCXXX)
- Bag limit: 1 bull caribou
- Season: August 1 – September 15
- Hunt area: All lands encompassed by the DHCMA and the CAMA within 26B

This structure establishes a reasonable cap on nonresident participation in the most accessible portions of Unit 26B while maintaining nonresident opportunity. It is intended to reduce crowding, minimize user conflicts, and increase hunter satisfaction. Nonresident Caribou hunters would still be able to hunt caribou with a harvest ticket under state regulations in 26B remainder.

WHAT WOULD THE PROPOSAL DO?

This proposal would establish the Central Arctic Management Area (CAMA) within Game Management Unit 26B. The CAMA is specifically designed to encompass the river systems accessible from the Dalton Highway that are heavily relied upon by Alaska residents. These river corridors represent the only practical opportunity for residents to travel beyond the road system without the use of an aircraft and are critical travel routes for those attempting to meet subsistence needs.

These drainages have been extensively utilized by residents for generations and function as the primary access network in this region. It is important that all river systems that are potentially accessible by boat or airboat are included within the CAMA to ensure that nonresident hunting pressure does not simply shift into adjacent, unregulated areas.

The upstream navigability points identified in this proposal were intentionally selected as reasonable high-water limits of motorized access. This approach ensures that the regulatory boundary remains effective under varying conditions and prevents the displacement of hunting pressure into areas that could otherwise still be reached by boat during favorable conditions.

Area Description

- The CAMA would consist of river corridors accessible by jet boat or airboat from the Sagavanirktok River and its tributaries
- The CAMA would begin where the listed drainages exit the DHCMA and extend to the defined navigability points
- Boundaries would extend 5 miles outward from each bank of included rivers and tributaries
- This creates a 10-mile-wide corridor along these drainages outside the DHCMA

Upstream Navigability Points (CAMA Boundary Definition)

River / Tributary	Upstream Navigability Point (Lat/Long)	Notes
Sagavanirktok River	68°29'52.93"N, 149°0'31.03"W	Upstream navigability point
Ribdon River	68°38'25.01"N, 148°15'59.93"W	Upstream navigability point
Lupine River	68°47'33.87"N 148°6'36.78"W	Upstream navigability point
Ivishak River	69°0'41.30"N 147°20'25.09"W	Upstream navigability point
Saviukviayak River	68°50'39.74"N, 147°58'20.32"W	Upstream navigability point
Echooka River	69°7'20.51"N, 147°3'31.65"W	Upstream navigability point
Sagavanirktok River (Downstream)	70°14'31.69"N, 147°50'0.22"W	Northern extent to Arctic Ocean. This would encompass the area accessible by boat outside of the Deadhorse closed area.

*These points represent the reasonable upstream extent of motorized boat access and define the upstream and downstream boundaries of the CAMA corridors. *

Boundary Integration

- Where CAMA overlaps with the DHCMA or other CAMA corridors, the areas would:
 - Merge and function as a single management area for nonresident draw permits
 - Retain existing regulations specific to each area
- Key distinction:
 - DHCMA: Bow-only restriction remains
 - CAMA: Standard weapon regulations apply

Nonresident Hunter Access Options

Successful permit holders may:

- Hunt along the Dalton Highway within the DHCMA, or
- Access river corridors within the CAMA using:
 - Transporter services
 - Boat rentals
 - Personal watercraft

This maintains flexibility for nonresident hunters while ensuring participation remains limited and predictable.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSAL?

1. Addresses Increasing Nonresident Pressure

Preliminary Alaska Department of Fish and Game data shows nonresident hunting pressure in Unit 26B has steadily increased and has accounted for nearly 50% of total hunting pressure since 2021.

This increase is most evident in areas accessible by road and boat, where hunters are concentrated into relatively small portions of the unit.

Hunter Participation Trends by Access Type

Year	Nonresident (Boat/Airboat)	Nonresident (Highway Access)	Resident (Boat/Airboat)	Resident (Highway Access)
2021	131	202	66	353
2022	177	247	101	416
2023	266	331	180	529
2024	346	456	229	763
2025	295	448	N/A	N/A

Note: 2025 resident data was not available at the time of this proposal. ADF&G indicates participation is tracking within historical averages.

These trends clearly demonstrate the rapid increase in nonresident participation—particularly in the most accessible areas. Prior to 2021, available data consistently showed significantly more resident hunters than nonresident hunters utilizing boats and airboats for access. In recent years, this trend has shifted, reflecting a sharp increase in do-it-yourself (DIY) nonresident hunters, many of whom rely on transporter services. Highway-access participation by nonresidents has also increased substantially and is now approaching resident participation levels, which historically did not occur. As a result, many Alaska residents are beginning to abandon these areas and the associated subsistence opportunities due to increasing crowding and pressure from nonresident hunters.

Protects Resident Access to Critical Hunting Areas

The Dalton Highway and Sagavanirktok River system represent some of the most accessible caribou hunting opportunities in northern Alaska.

These areas are heavily relied upon by Alaska residents who:

- Do not have the ability to fly into remote areas
- Depend on these accessible corridors for food security

Unit 26B remains one of the few areas where residents can harvest caribou without:

- Drawing a permit
- Paying significant costs for fly-in access

Addresses the Importance of Accessible Caribou Hunting for Alaska Residents

Across Alaska, ungulate populations accessible from the road system or reachable by reasonable boat travel have declined and are struggling. As a result, the remaining accessible hunting opportunities are becoming increasingly important for resident hunters who rely on wild game to feed their families.

Unit 26B and the Central Arctic Caribou Herd (CACH) represent one of the few remaining opportunities for Alaska residents to harvest caribou without drawing a limited permit or paying extremely expensive transporter fly-in costs to access remote areas. Due to unlimited nonresident opportunity and growing demand, many air transporters now offer flat-rate drop hunts at premium prices rather than traditional hourly billing for flight time—a cost structure that the vast majority of Alaska residents cannot reasonably afford.

Because of this, Unit 26B is becoming an increasingly important food security resource for Alaska residents, particularly those who depend on accessible, lower-cost hunting opportunities to provide meat for their families.

Addresses the Effects of Unlimited Nonresident Opportunity and Hunter Density

Several factors are contributing to increasing pressure in Unit 26B:

- Unlimited nonresident hunting opportunity
- A liberal nonresident bag limit
- Increasing numbers of transporters, hunt planners, and other businesses catering to DIY nonresident hunters

These conditions have led to a substantial rise in nonresident participation, particularly in road- and boat-accessible areas where hunters are concentrated into relatively small portions of the unit.

When nonresident opportunity remains unlimited, it creates a feedback cycle in which increasing numbers of hunters attract additional transporters and commercial services, which in turn make these hunts even more accessible to additional nonresident hunters. As services expand and participation grows, hunting pressure can continue to increase year after year.

Over time, this dynamic accelerates hunting pressure and intensifies crowding in the most accessible portions of the unit. Without reasonable limits on participation, these trends will likely continue to worsen.

While the Central Arctic Caribou Herd may still support harvest biologically, excessive hunter density can significantly reduce hunt quality, hunter satisfaction, and opportunity for resident hunters.

High hunter density can result in:

- Reduced ability for hunters to locate animals
- Increased competition and crowding among hunters in accessible areas
- Greater likelihood of user conflicts

When participation levels become high enough that crowding and competition prevent many residents from having a quality hunt, it becomes appropriate to implement management tools that restore balance. This proposal directly addresses these issues by placing reasonable limits on the segment of hunters driving the majority of increased pressure.

Applies Proven Wildlife Management Principles

Across North America, wildlife managers recognize that hunter density—not just population levels—affects hunt quality and opportunity.

In highly accessible areas, limited entry systems are commonly used to:

- Maintain reasonable hunter density
- Preserve hunt quality

- Ensure fair distribution of opportunity

Applying this approach in Unit 26B aligns with widely accepted management practices.

Provides Proactive, Responsible Management

Recent surveys indicate the Central Arctic Caribou Herd has declined since its 2022 estimate of approximately 34,600 animals.

While the herd may still support additional bull caribou harvest, these trends support taking measured, proactive management steps. This proposal is not a reactionary restriction, but a forward-looking framework that helps ensure long-term sustainability and improve several issues such as overcrowding, declining hunter satisfaction, and declining hunt quality.

Establishes a Clear and Flexible Management Framework

Creating the CAMA provides:

- A clearly defined regulatory management area
- A framework for future adjustments if needed
- Improved ability for ADF&G and the Board of Game to manage pressure in accessible areas

While initially complex, this structure simplifies long-term management. The Alaska Department of Fish and Game GIS section would be responsible for developing the official regulatory boundaries for the CAMA. ADF&G GIS staff were contacted and provided an overview of the proposed area, and they indicated that mapping and implementing these boundaries is feasible and well within their capabilities.

Manages the Entire Accessible Landscape as One System

The Dalton Highway corridor and Sagavanirktok River system function as a single accessible hunting landscape.

Managing only one of these areas would likely shift pressure to the other, increasing crowding elsewhere.

This proposal manages both together to:

- Prevent displacement of pressure
- Maintain balance across the system

Maintains Opportunity While Establishing a Cap

This proposal does not eliminate nonresident hunting opportunity.

Instead, it:

- Maintains meaningful access for nonresidents
- Establishes a predictable cap on participation
- Balances nonresident hunting pressure in areas heavily utilized by residents

Maintains Appropriate Opportunity for Guided and Family-Based Hunting

This proposal intentionally allows nonresident caribou hunters who are using a registered guide, as well as nonresident hunters accompanied by a resident second-degree of kindred, to continue hunting within the CAMA and DHCMA with a harvest ticket.

Much of the land encompassed by the proposed CAMA falls within federal ANWR guide use areas ARC 09 and ARC 10, where guiding activity is already subject to strict federal oversight and limitations on the number of clients that can be taken annually. As a result, guided hunting activity in these areas is limited, regulated, and predictable, and is not a primary driver of increased hunting pressure or user conflicts.

Maintaining this opportunity ensures that existing guide operations can continue to operate within their authorized areas and continue to provide services to an already limited number of clients without disruption. This is consistent with current land management frameworks and avoids unintended impacts to federally regulated guiding systems.

Similarly, nonresident hunters accompanied by a resident second-degree of kindred represent a very small and consistent portion of overall hunting pressure. These hunts are family-based, occur at a limited scale, and are not contributing to the increasing crowding and competition observed in accessible areas.

The primary source of increased pressure and conflict in Unit 26B is the rapid growth in do-it-yourself (DIY) nonresident hunting, particularly in areas accessible by road and boat. By focusing the draw permit structure specifically on this segment of hunters, the proposal directly addresses the root cause of user conflicts while avoiding unnecessary restrictions on guided and family-based hunting.

A similar management structure already exists in Southeast Alaska for black bear hunting in Game Management Units 1, 2, and 3. In those units, Alaska experienced a substantial increase in DIY nonresident hunters and transporter services, resulting in rapidly increasing hunting pressure. Land managers and regulatory agencies could not effectively regulate the expanding transporter sector, while guided hunting activity was already controlled through land manager permitting systems and resident and second-degree-of-kindred hunting was not identified as a driver of the problem.

In response, the Board of Game implemented a draw permit system specifically for nonresident hunters NOT using a registered guide and NOT accompanied by a resident second-degree of kindred. This approach allowed managers to place reasonable limits on the segment of hunters

responsible for the rapid increase in participation while maintaining opportunity for guided hunters and traditional resident-family hunting arrangements. The same underlying conditions now exist in Unit 26B, and applying this proven structure follows an established and effective management approach already adopted by the Board of Game.

Outside of the ANWR guide use areas, there is currently little to none known guided hunting occurring on the state land within the DHCMA and proposed CAMA. While these lands are state-managed and guiding could potentially expand in the future, any such increase would be identifiable and addressable. By establishing the CAMA and associated regulatory framework now, the Board of Game would have a clear and effective mechanism already in place to implement additional management tools if guided pressure on state land within the DHCMA and CAMA were to emerge as a concern. This ensures that future issues could be addressed in a targeted and efficient manner without requiring a complete restructuring of regulations.

CONCLUSION

This proposal represents a balanced and practical approach to managing one of Alaska's most important and accessible caribou hunting areas.

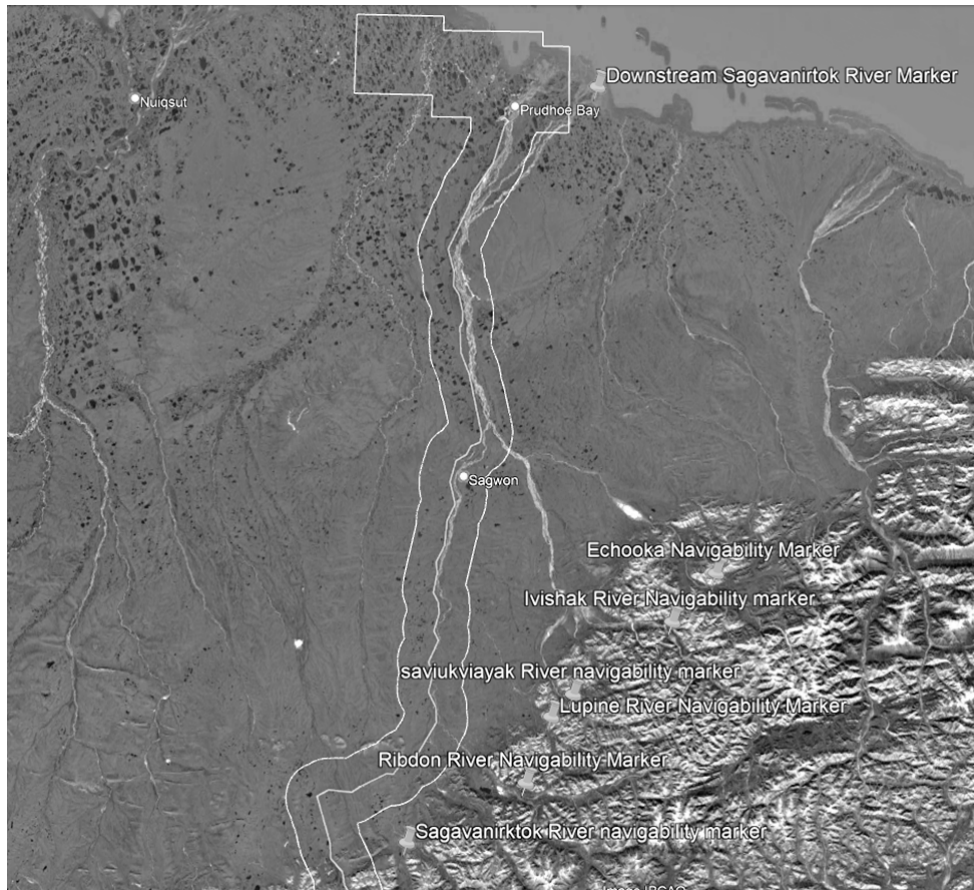
By creating the CAMA and placing nonresident hunting opportunity within the CAMA and DHCMA on a limited draw permit system, the Board of Game can:

- Reduce crowding and user conflicts
- Protect resident hunting opportunity
- Increase hunter satisfaction
- Ensure long-term usability of these areas

At the same time, nonresident hunters would continue to have fair and regulated access.

This approach ensures that Unit 26B remains a viable and accessible hunting opportunity for current and future generations of Alaskans.

PICTURE SHOWING DRAINAGES AND NAVIGABILITY POINTS



* A color version of this map is available online at <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=gameboard.proposalbook>

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

Overcrowding, user conflict, and decreasing hunter satisfaction in Unit 26b for caribou hunting

Did you develop your proposal in coordination with others, or with your local fish and game advisory committee?

Yes this proposal was discussed with numerous other Alaska residents, hunting guides in 26B, and was supported unanimously by the Mat Su Valley AC.

PROPOSED BY: Grant Kopplin

(OI-F26-025)
