

Proposal 20

5 AAC 92.106. Intensive management of identified big game prey populations.

Establish an Intensive Management plan for the Western Arctic caribou herd in Units 22, 23, and 26A as follows:

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

Establish an Intensive Management (IM) plan for the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH) for the control of wolves and brown bears.

The WAH has historically been the largest herd in Alaska and has provided subsistence opportunity for up to 40 rural communities and other Alaskans across the state. This herd has a positive IM finding with population and IM objectives of at least 200,000 animals and a harvest objective of 12,000-20,000 animals (5 AAC 92.108). The WAH has been below the IM objective since 2021 (188,000 caribou). The long-term historical harvest for this herd has been estimated at more than 12,000 caribou annually and the estimated harvestable surplus (HS) has been below 12,000 caribou since 2020.

Despite regulatory changes that decreased bag limits and attempted to reduce the harvest of cows across Units 22, 23 and the western portion of 26A that took effect July 1, 2024, the WAH population has continued to decline. The harvestable surplus for the WAH has decreased concurrently with the population decline and is estimated at 5,800 bulls and no cows based on the 2025 census (121,000 caribou). Despite reducing the annual bag limit of cows to one per year in regulatory year 2024, according to permit data little to no reduction in cow harvest has occurred. The average annual harvest of cows from this herd is estimated at 4,000, which is no longer sustainable. Additional proposals submitted to the Board for consideration include the elimination of the cow season. In the short term, the department plans to close the cow season for RY 2027 through emergency order.

Currently, the harvestable surplus is nearing the lower end of the combined amount reasonably necessary for subsistence uses of 8,000-12,000 caribou from the WAH and Teshekpuk (TCH) herds (5AAC 99.025). The harvestable surplus for the TCH is estimated at 3,600, combining that with the harvestable surplus of 5,800 for the WAH, provides a combined surplus of 9,400 caribou. Continued decline from either or both of these herds will likely lead to an inability to provide for the ANS in the near future.

The WAH has been identified as important for providing high levels of harvest for human consumptive use, and as a result, Alaska statutes require the herd to be intensively managed. Considering the rate of continued decline, the department is proposing an IM plan be codified to benefit the WAH. The department has been working to identify the feasibility of a successful predator removal program and has identified opportunities for the temporary removal of both predator species. Estimates of predation rates on the WAH suggest that predation, primarily from

wolves and brown bears accounts for approximately 70% of the caribou mortality in this herd annually.

Wolves: Wolf density estimates are dated in Unit 23; the most recent efforts began in 1977 and concluded in 1991. Efforts to collar packs and subsequently estimate density, pack sizes, and predation on caribou are underway. The department plans to use this information to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of wolf removal on caribou recovery. If an IM plan is adopted and a feasibility assessment indicates wolf removal efforts could benefit the WAH, wolves would be lethally removed during the winter and spring in or near caribou wintering areas, primarily in Unit 23.

Brown Bears: Beginning in 2017 the department implemented a 3-year study of calf mortality which suggested that brown bear predation on the southern portion of the WAH calving grounds (Unit 26A) was a threat to calf survival. Additional mortality data from collared cows shows a relatively high proportion of adult cows being taken by brown bears enroute to the calving area north of the Brooks Range. If an IM plan is adopted and a feasibility assessment indicates brown bear removal efforts could benefit the WAH, brown bears would be lethally removed from the southern extent of the WAH calving grounds.

The department and the board are required to consider all the important, relevant, and material factors relating to the sustainability of a replenishable, public, wildlife resource prior to adoption of a regulatory proposal. The proposed intensive management predator control plan is designed to grow the WAH population to maintain harvestable surplus to offer hunting opportunity by reducing predation from wolves and brown bears. Brown bears and wolves preying on both adult and calf caribou may be removed. The proposed intensive management program for wolves and brown bears is designed to be sustainable for both species in the affected Units. All open seasons for harvest of wolves and brown bears will remain in the vicinity of the removal efforts.

The department is committed to the conscientious application of IM insofar as practicable of principles of management intended to sustain the yield of caribou, wolves and brown bears. The department has considered the role of predators in the ecosystem, as well as their distribution within the range of the WAH. Wolf and brown bear removal in this area under the proposed plan will occur in a small geographic area for a limited duration. Removing wolves and brown bears will have a minor effect on the wolf and brown bear populations. In addition, adequate refugia exists to sustain predator populations in the large swaths of adjacent federally managed lands. The proposed IM program has been carefully developed and is adaptable as new observations and information become available.

If adopted, the department will present an IM feasibility assessment at a future board meeting.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game (HQ-F26-035)
