

Proposal 98

5 AAC 92.123. Intensive Management Plans VII.

Reauthorize the Unit 19D East Intensive Management predation control program as follows:

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

5 AAC 92.123(c). Unit 19(D)-East Predation Control Area.

(c) Unit 19(D)-East Predation Control Area: the Unit 19(D)-East Predation Control Area is established and consists of those portions of the Kuskokwim River drainage within Unit 19(D) upstream from the Selatna River drainage, but excluding the Black River drainage, encompassing approximately 8,513 square miles; this predation control program does not apply to any National Park Service or National Wildlife Refuge lands unless approved by the federal agencies; notwithstanding any other provisions in this title, and based on the following information contained in this section, the commissioner or the commissioner's designee may conduct a wolf and a black bear and a brown bear population reduction or a wolf and a black bear and a brown bear population regulation program in Unit 19(D)-East to benefit moose:

(1) the following Wolf and Bear Control Focus Areas are established in the Unit 19(D)-East Predation Control Area; the areas do not delineate a moose, wolf, or bear population and are not intended to distinguish animals within the focus areas from populations in Unit 19(D)-East; the purpose is to focus wolf and bear control in a relatively small area where moose numbers can be better estimated, where moose are accessible to hunters, and where harvest can be closely monitored;

(A) the Wolf Control Focus Area (WCFA) encompasses approximately 5,579 square miles within that portion of Unit 19(D) upstream of the Selatna River drainage, but excluding the Black River drainage, and downstream of, but not including Fourth of July Creek, the Swift Fork, or the Slow Fork and Tonzona River drainages east of 153° 10.00' W. long.; wolf control will be conducted only within the WCFA; the department will have the discretion to adjust the WCFA's size and shape to include up to approximately 6,000 square miles of Unit 19(D)-East;

(B) the Black Bear and Brown Bear Predation Control Focus Area (BCFA) encompasses approximately 528 square miles consisting of those portions of the Kuskokwim River drainage enclosed by a line starting at a point northwest of McGrath at 63° 04.00' N. lat., 155° 50.00' W. long., then east to 63° 04.00' N. lat., 154° 50.00' W. long., then south to 62° 54.00' N. lat., 154° 50.00' W. long., then west to 62° 54.00' N. lat., 155° 25.00' W. long., then south to 62° 50.00' N. lat., 155° 25.00' W. long., then west to 62° 50.00' N. lat., 155° 30.00' W. long., then south to 62° 48.00' N. lat., 155° 30.00' W. long., then west to 62° 48.00' N. lat., 155° 35.00' W. long., then south to 62° 42.00' N. lat., 155° 35.00' W. long., then west to 62° 42.00' N. lat., 155° 55.00' W. long., then north to 62° 50.00' N. lat., 155° 55.00' W. long., then east to 62° 50.00' N. lat., 155° 50.00' W. long., then north to the point of beginning at 63° 04.00' N. lat.,

155° 50.00' W. long., surrounding the village of McGrath; bear control will be conducted only within the BCFA; the department will have the discretion to adjust the BCFA's size and shape up to approximately 680 square miles of Unit 19(D)-East; the BCFA is within the WCFA;

(2) this is a continuing control program that was first authorized by the board in 1995; wolf control began in winter 2003 - 2004 and bear control began with nonlethal removal of bears in the BCFA during May 2003 and May 2004; the control program is currently designed to increase moose numbers and harvest in the WCFA and BCFA by reducing predation on moose and is expected to make a contribution to achieving the intensive management (IM) objectives in Unit 19(D)-East;

(3) moose, wolf, black bear, and brown bear objectives are as follows:

(A) moose IM objectives established by the board for Unit 19(D)-East are for a population of 6,000 - 8,000 moose and an annual harvest of 400 - 600 moose;

(B) the **population** [DENSITY] objective for moose in the WCFA is **5,600 moose** [1.0 MOOSE PER SQUARE MILE] (corrected for sightability) in fall **or late winter** surveys; **the population objective for moose in the BCFA is 1,050 moose (corrected for sightability) in fall or late winter surveys;** the annual harvest objective for the WCFA is **140** [225] moose;

(C) the wolf control objective in the WCFA is to reduce wolf numbers **to the lowest level possible** [BY AT LEAST 60 - 80 PERCENT]; the pre-control wolf population in Unit 19(D)-East was estimated in February 2001 at 198 wolves; the 2001 pre-control estimate within the WCFA **was** [IS] 130 wolves; only removing wolves from the WCFA will ensure that wolves persist in Unit 19(D)-East.

(D) the black bear control objective in the BCFA is to reduce black bear numbers to the lowest level possible; the pre-control black bear population in Unit 19(D)-East was estimated at 1,700 black bears; the pre-control black bear population estimate within the BCFA was approximately 130 black bears; because the BCFA is a relatively small geographic area, removing black bears from within the BCFA will have only a minor effect on the black bear population in Unit 19(D)-East;

(E) the brown bear control objective in the BCFA is to reduce brown bear numbers to the lowest level possible; the pre-control brown bear population in Unit 19(D)-East was estimated at 128 brown bears; the pre-control brown bear population estimate within the BCFA was nine; because the BCFA is a relatively small geographic area, removing brown bears from within the BCFA will have only a minor effect on the brown bear population in Unit 19(D)-East;

(4) board findings concerning populations and human use are as follows:

(A) the Unit 19(D)-East moose **population and harvest objectives have** [HARVEST OBJECTIVE HAS] not been achieved;

(B) the [WCFA OBJECTIVE FOR MOOSE HARVEST HAS NOT BEEN ACHIEVED;] **moose population in the WCFA and BCFA are currently below objective and harvest in the WCFA is currently below objective;**

(C) predation by wolves and bears is an important cause of the failure to achieve **population and** harvest objectives;

(D) a reduction of wolf and bear predation within the WCFA and BCFA can reasonably be expected to make progress towards achieving the Unit 19(D)-East intensive management objectives;

(E) reducing predation is likely to be effective and feasible using recognized and prudent active management techniques and based on scientific information;

(F) reducing predation is likely to be effective given land ownership patterns;

(G) Unit 19D-East is recognized under the state's intensive management law as an area where moose are to be managed for high levels of harvest for human consumptive use; reducing predation is in the best interest of subsistence users; the area has long been an important hunting area for subsistence by local area residents as well as other Alaska residents;

(5) **if the moose population in the WCFA and BCFA, and harvest objectives in the WCFA are not met and two-year average twinning rates are above 20 percent,** authorized methods and means are as follows:

(A) hunting and trapping of wolves and hunting of black bears and brown bears by the public in Unit 19(D)-East during the term of this program may occur as provided in the hunting and trapping regulations set out elsewhere in this title, including use of motorized vehicles;

(B) notwithstanding any other provisions in this title, the commissioner may allow department employees to conduct aerial, land and shoot, or ground-based lethal removal of wolves and black bears and brown bears using state-owned, privately-owned, or chartered equipment, including helicopters, under AS 16.05.783;

(C) notwithstanding any other provisions in this title, the commissioner may issue public aerial shooting permits or public land and shoot permits using fixed-wing aircraft as a method of wolf removal under AS 16.05.783;

(6) time frame is as follows:

(A) before July 1, **2033** [2030], the commissioner may authorize removal of wolves and black bears and brown bears in Unit 19(D)-East;

(B) annually, the department shall, to the extent practicable, provide to the board a report of program activities conducted during the preceding 12 months, including implementation activities, the status of the moose, wolf, and bear populations, and recommendations for changes, if necessary to achieve the objectives of the plan;

(7) the commissioner will review, modify, or suspend program activities when:

(A) the moose **population in the WCFA or BCFA, or harvest objectives in the WCFA are achieved;** [DENSITY AND HARVEST OBJECTIVES SPECIFIED IN THIS SUBSECTION ARE ACHIEVED WITHIN THE WCFA;]

(B) any measure consistent with signs of nutritional stress in the moose population are identified.

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

The 19D-East Predation Control Plan was initially authorized in 1995. However, the predation control program did not begin until December 2003. The Board of Game (board) authorized the current plan in March 2020, reauthorized it in March 2024, and it expires June 30, 2030. The current plan has not been updated since 2020 and this proposal seeks to evaluate the current objectives, including program-specific harvest objectives, population objectives, and predator removal objectives. If approved by the board, this plan will remain in place from July 1, 2027 through June 30, 2033.

Both department and public periods of bear removal, a 23-year wolf removal program and a large wildfire have occurred since the program was implemented confounding the department's ability to assess the program's efficacy. Moose abundance increased from 2003 through 2022. However, following an exceptionally deep snow winter (2022/2023) the moose population declined to 2012 levels.

The current program objectives include achieving a moose abundance of 1.0 moose/mi² and a harvest objective of 225 moose, both measured at the scale of the Wolf Control Focus Area (WCFA). While moose harvest from the WCFA is assessed annually, geospatial population estimate (GSPE) surveys for moose are conducted in a 1,118 mi² area surrounding the Bear Control Focus Area (BCFA). The department conducted these surveys as part of an ongoing research program, but they precluded more frequent surveys of the WCFA, which has not been surveyed since 2017. Within the WCFA, moose densities approximately doubled from 2001 (0.5 moose/mi²) to 2017 (1.1 moose/mi²), briefly exceeding the IM density objective of 1.0 moose/mi². While the WCFA has not been surveyed since 2017, a 2023 GSPE survey in the 1,118 mi² survey area surrounding the BCFA showed a decline of approximately 36% to 1.4 moose/mi², after reaching a high of 2.1 moose/mi² in 2017. If the WCFA moose density declined at a similar rate, the moose population there would now be below the density objective for the

WCFA. The harvest objective of 225 moose has not been met to date. However, with the limited access in Unit 19D East, it is unlikely a harvest of 225 moose can be achieved.

Wolf removal objectives in this program have been tied to a pre-control abundance estimate of 198 wolves (23 wolves/1000mi²) in 2001 in Unit 19D East. Using this density, the department estimated there were 130 wolves, pre-control, in the current WCFA (5,579 mi²). Only public aerial wolf removals have been conducted and most wolves are removed in February-March, with highly variable removal rates. The population has been able to sustain removals of 14-73 wolves and maintain an average fall population of 54 wolves. In the last decade, fall wolf abundance estimates have been among the highest recorded by the department during the program, similar to those recorded in the mid-1990s, but likely low compared to the current prey base. Total wolf removals in the last decade have also been among the highest recorded in the program, suggesting the sustainability of the wolf removal levels.

Moving forward, the WCFA will be the primary focus for abundance estimates for moose, with a secondary objective based on the BCFA. The department is reducing the moose harvest objectives within the WCFA to more closely reflect demonstrated historical levels of harvest, and to reflect what is achievable in areas that are accessible to hunters (i.e. river corridors and the limited road systems).

This proposal retains the option of both public- and department-conducted wolf removals, and department-conducted bear removals. The department will issue public aerial permits as long as the moose population is below the stated population and harvest objectives, and the department has no indications of nutritional stress in moose. Removing bears only from the BCFA, and wolves only from the WCFA will ensure predator populations persist in Unit 19D East.

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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