

**Findings of the Alaska Board of Game
2003-143-BOG**

Authorizing Wolf Control in Portions of Unit 13

Background

Unit 13 long has been an important hunting area for the bulk of the state's population in Anchorage, the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, and Fairbanks. It is recognized under the state's intensive management law as an area where moose and caribou are to be managed for high levels of human consumptive use.

For the past decade, the Board of Game has heard persistent concern from local residents, hunters and wildlife managers about a continuous and steep decline in the moose population across most of Unit 13.

The Board has concurrently heard the equally persistent concern that predation is causing the moose decline. Researchers and public testimony identify the primary causes of poor calf survival and dwindling population:

- year-round predation by wolves and
- late spring/early summer brown bear predation on calves.

Under the Wolf Conservation and Management Policy adopted by the Board in 1991 and revised in 1993, "in areas managed for high consumptive use where predation is keeping prey at low levels, ADF&G may implement wolf population regulation or reduction to allow prey species to increase to population management objectives." Under this policy, the Board will consider wolf control when:

- wolf predation is a factor in an unacceptable decline in prey population size or productivity, or
- wolf predation is a factor preventing attainment of approved population or human use objectives."

Both situations clearly apply to Unit 13.

In an effort to initiate predation control activity, the Board established in 1999 a wolf predation control area covering much of Unit 13 under 5 AAC 92.125 (5). While this wolf predation control area has been in place since 1999, the state has taken no action.

Under AS 16.05.783, Board of Game may authorize a predator control program involving airborne or same day airborne shooting as part of a game management program if the Board determines certain steps are met:

- objectives set by the Board for the big game prey population have not been achieved,
- predation is an important cause for failure to achieve the set objectives, and
- reducing predation can reasonably be expected to help achieve those objectives.

Board Objectives for the Big Game Prey Population Have Not Been Achieved

Through a series of incremental steps over time, the Board has moved to reduce wolf and bear numbers in Unit 13 in order to meet the objectives set by the Board under the state's intensive management law. Longer seasons, more liberal bag limits and additional methods and means are now in place. A wolf predation control area was established. These actions have not stemmed the moose decline, nor have they provided the hoped-for predator reduction.

Concurrent with its efforts to ease predation, the Board reduced human harvests of moose by shortening resident hunting seasons, eliminating nonresident hunters, and adopting more selective antler restrictions. Fewer people are hunting and harvest is shrinking.

Pregnancy rates for adult cow moose haven't declined and productivity remains high. Calves are being born but are not surviving, so the average age of the moose population has increased. Older animals are more susceptible to predation and severe winter weather.

Predation is an Important Cause for Failure to Achieve the Set Objectives

Moose and caribou make up the bulk of a wolf's diet in Unit 13. It is estimated one wolf kills 12 moose or 36 caribou, or some combination thereof, each year to support itself. Wolves take moose of all ages and both sexes, mostly during early winter through late spring.

The Board has already established wolf hunting and trapping seasons that are as long as reasonably practical. Any further liberalization would have little impact on overall wolf numbers. Few additional wolves would be taken due to poor access and poor pelt quality.

Wolf harvests are at record levels, averaging 211 over the past 3 years. Nevertheless, due to high productivity, the spring 2003 wolf population estimate was 253. Even with another high harvest, the wolf population will probably remain well above the Board-established spring objective of 135-165.

Several studies show that brown bears take more than half of the moose calves born each spring. The predation rate remains heavy until calves are about six weeks old. After that, brown bears can and do kill moose of all ages and both sexes, but the rate at which they do so is greatly diminished.

In actions similar to liberalizing wolf seasons, the Board has gone as far as possible to reduce the number of brown bears given current hunting regulations, including establishing a year-round season for most of Unit 13. A series of record brown bear harvests averaging 141 bears per season over the past 6 years resulted. Although recent high harvest rates exceed estimates of sustainable levels, the Board has no evidence the bear population is being – or even will be – reduced.

Reducing Predation Can Reasonably Be Expected to Help Achieve Objectives Set by the Board

Despite Board actions via standard hunting and trapping regulations to liberalize wolf and bear hunting, those predators remain high. Meanwhile, the moose population continues to decline, despite Board actions that have curtailed human harvest. Numbers of cow moose have declined 64% over the past 5 years. Total moose numbers have declined 10% annually for the past 3 years.

It is clear that removing predators will help the moose population to recover so that human harvest objects can be achieved.

While it is Board policy to manage wolf populations and predation through routine hunting and trapping, predation control programs using methods not generally approved for hunting and trapping may be implemented. One such method is the use of aircraft.

Given the experience over the past decade, it is clear to the Board that the moose population cannot be restored, and wolf numbers cannot be reduced enough, to meet management objectives without the use of aircraft to control wolves.

It should be emphasized that under the Board's wolf management policy, such control programs "are not expected to be permanent, on-going activities" and control of wolves must be done in such a way as to "assure continued viability of wolves in the ecosystem."

The use aircraft will not jeopardize the long-term viability of wolves in Unit 13 or the state as a whole, where the wolf population is estimated at 7,660 to 11,170.

Once the objectives of the wolf predation control area are achieved, the Predator Control Program should cease. However, any future increase in wolf population with a commensurate decrease in moose population should trigger another predator control activity.

The Board of Game hereby authorizes a Predator Control Program using aircraft for the Wolf Predation Control Implementation Plan for Unit 13 under 5AAC 92.125(5).

Vote: _____
November 4, 2003
Anchorage, Alaska

Mike Fleagle, Chair
Alaska Board of Game