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PRESS RELEASE

COMMISSIONER'S OFFICE

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State Wildlife Managers: Immediate Action Required to Protect Unimak Island Caribou Herd

ANCHORAGE – State wildlife managers intend to move forward with plans to protect the Unimak Island Caribou Herd. An official letter was sent today from Commissioner Denby Lloyd to Rowan Gould at the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). “Immediate action is required to protect this herd, specifically this year’s calves” said Wildlife Conservation Director, Corey Rossi. Rossi noted “waiting to take action places this year’s calves in too great a jeopardy.” In the most recent fall survey, a total of only seven calves were found, only two of which were males.

Caribou on Unimak have been identified as a traditional subsistence resource for local residents by the Alaska Board of Game and the Federal Subsistence Board. The Department has been meeting with and has discussed the urgently proposed action with USFWS. ADF&G continues to seek cooperative efforts to protect this important subsistence resource. The USFWS administers most of the land on Unimak Island through its refuge system.

“To our knowledge, bull:cow ratios below 10:100 have not been previously reported in Alaskan caribou herds,” previous Division of Wildlife Conservation Director Doug Larsen wrote in a Dec. 22 letter to Izembek National Wildlife Refuge Manager Nancy Hoffman who administers refuge lands on Unimak Island. Based on Department experience on the Southern Alaska Peninsula, removal of a relatively small number of wolves can dramatically boost calf recruitment.

Wolves are common on the island of 1,571 square miles, and are frequently observed during caribou surveys. There is no official estimate of wolf numbers on the island but areas of similar size, habitat, and prey base on the Alaska Peninsula would indicate 20-30 wolves in 3-5 packs. Wolves would only be reduced on calving areas on the western half of the island

As recently as 2002, the Unimak herd numbered more than 1,200 with 54 bulls and 31 calves per 100 cows. Calf recruitment was down to 7:100 cows by 2005 and was only 3 calves per 100 cows in 2009.

Rossi reiterated that the current situation on Unimak is critical: “If action is not taken soon, there is a high likelihood of losing not only this caribou herd for use by local subsistence users and others, but also the wolf population for many years to come.”

Additional information including today’s release, the Commissioner’s letter, and a Department presentation explaining the biological considerations of Unimak Caribou Herd may be found online at: www.adfg.state.ak.us

The Department plans to ask the Alaska Board of Game to approve an Emergency Order extending hunting and trapping through June of this year.

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