Species Management Report and Plan ADF&G/DWC/SMR&P–2025–53

Deer Management Report and Plan, Game Management Unit 1B:

Report Period 1 July 2016–30 June 2021, and

Plan Period 1 July 2021–30 June 2026

W. Frank Robbins

2025

Alaska Department of Fish and Game Division of Wildlife Conservation

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Species management reports and plans provide information about species that are hunted or trapped and management actions, goals, recommendations for those species, and plans for data collection. Detailed information is prepared for each species every 5 years by the area management biologist for game management units in their areas, who also develops a plan for data collection and species management for the next 5 years. This type of report is not produced for species that are not managed for hunting or trapping or for areas where there is no current or anticipated activity. Unit reports are reviewed and approved for publication by regional management coordinators and are available to the public via the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's public website.

This species management report and plan was reviewed and approved for publication by Roy Churchwell, Management Coordinator for Region I for the Division of Wildlife Conservation.

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Purpose of this Report

This report provides a record of survey and inventory management activities for deer (*Odocoileus hemionus stikensis*) in Game Management Unit 1B for the 5 regulatory years 2016–2020 and plans for survey and inventory management activities in the next 5 regulatory years, 2021–2025. A regulatory year (RY) begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., RY15 = 1 July 2015–30 June 2016). This report was primarily produced to provide agency staff with data and analysis to help guide and record agency efforts but is also provided to the public to inform it of wildlife management activities. In 2016 the Alaska Department of Fish and Game's (ADF&G, the department) Division of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) launched this 5-year report to more efficiently report on trends and to describe potential changes in data collection activities over the next 5 years. It replaces the deer management report of survey and inventory activities that was previously produced every 2 years.

I. RY16–RY20 Management Report

Management Area

Game Management Unit 1B consists of approximately 3,000 mi^2 (7,770 km^2) of land area on the central Southeast Alaska mainland, extending from Cape Fanshaw south to Lemesurier Point and northeast of those points to the Canadian border (Fig. 1). There are no major communities in Unit 1B; however, small settlements exist at Point Agassiz near Thomas Bay, on Farm Island in the Stikine Delta, and at Meyer's Chuck on the Cleveland Peninsula.

The Stikine River is a transboundary mainland river system which originates in Spatsizi Plateau of British Columbia and transects the Coast Range before flowing into Sumner Strait near Wrangell, Alaska. About 30 mi (48 km) of the river lies within the boundaries of Alaska where it flows through a steep valley 1.2–1.9 mi (2–3 km) wide. The Stikine Delta is the largest intertidal wetland in Southeast Alaska and consists of 77 mi^2 (200 km^2) of marsh and tidal flats (Craighead et al. 1984).

Most land area in Unit 1B is within the Tongass National Forest and under federal ownership, with smaller parcels under state, municipal, and private ownership. Elevation within Unit 1B ranges from sea level to 9,078 ft (2,767 m). Predominant vegetative communities occurring at low to moderate elevations include Sitka spruce (*Picea sitchensis*), western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) coniferous forest, mixed-conifer muskeg, and deciduous riparian forests. Mountain forests, dominated by hemlock (*T. mertensiana*), compose a subalpine, timberline band occupying elevations between 1,500 ft and 2,500 ft (457 m and 762 m).

In addition to deer, big game species present and widely distributed throughout Unit 1B include moose (*Alces alces andersoni*), mountain goats (*Oreamnos americanus*), black bears (*Ursus americanus*), brown bears (*U. arctos*), and wolves (*Canis lupus ligoni*).

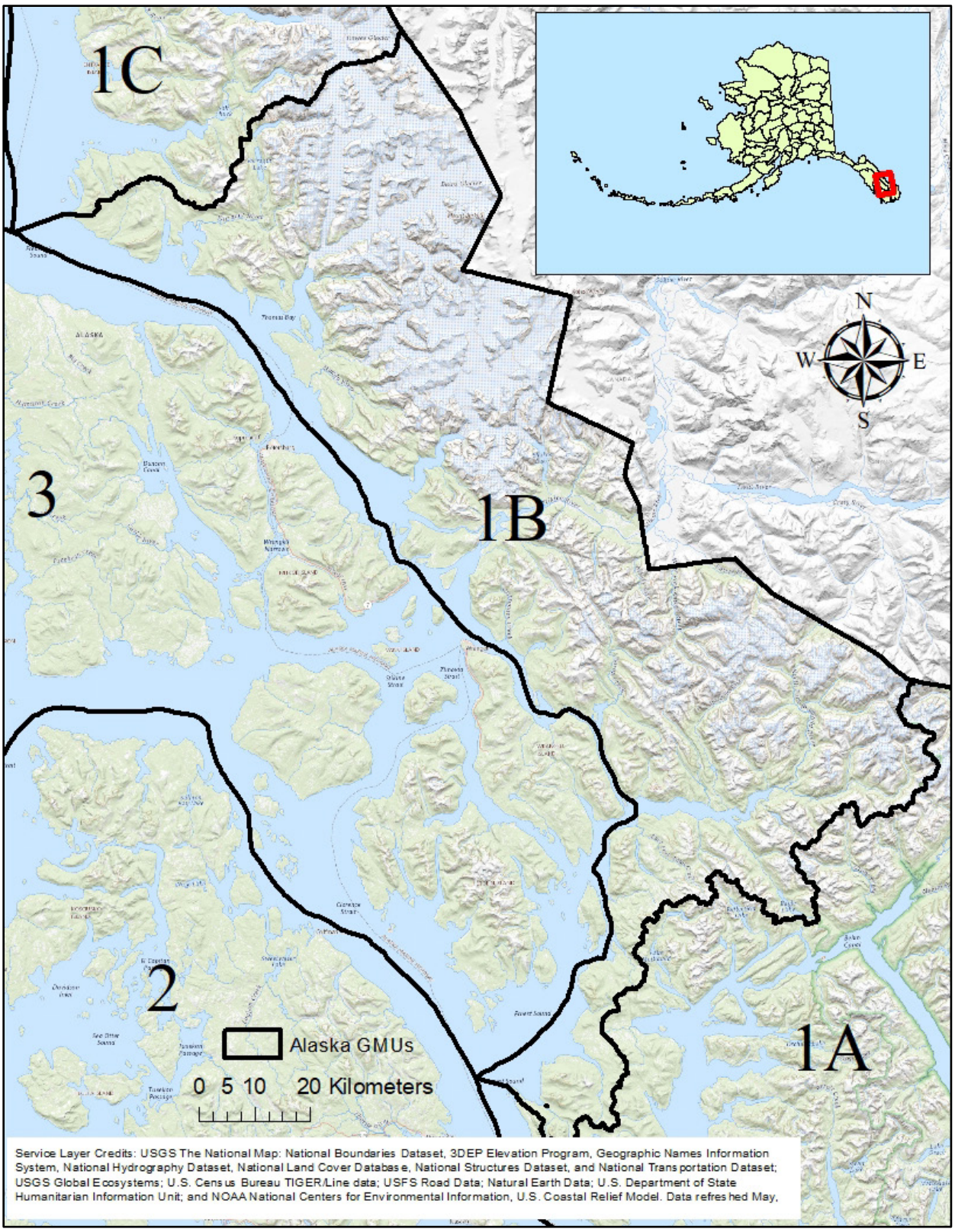

Figure 1. Map of Game Management Unit 1B, Southeast Alaska, regulatory years 2016–2020.

Summary of Status, Trend, Management Activities, and History of Sitka black-tailed Deer in Unit 1B

Except in isolated pockets, Sitka black-tailed deer inhabit the Unit 1B mainland in low densities. Historically, the Thomas Bay area and the Cleveland Peninsula have been the primary deer population centers. Deer numbers have fluctuated over time with high and low population extremes. The deer population on the Cleveland Peninsula has declined markedly over the last couple of decades. Severe winter weather has caused most population declines, and predation by wolves and bears have extended the length of the declines. Clearcut logging has and will continue to further reduce deer carrying capacity in some areas.

A significant population decline occurred as a result of a series of severe winters in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The population declines led to restrictive regulations and bag limits in 1973. Unit 1B remained open, with a bag limit of 1 antlered deer from 1973 to 1980 and a limit of 2 antlered deer from 1981 to the present. The most recent significant population declines occurred as a result of a series of severe deep snow winters during 2006–2007, 2007–2008, and 2008–2009.

Although the communities of Petersburg and Wrangell are located only a short distance west of Unit 1B, much of the hunting effort by individuals in these communities is focused on the adjacent Unit 3 islands. The deer season in most of neighboring Unit 3 closes more than a month earlier than Unit 1B, after which some Petersburg residents shift their deer hunting efforts to the mainland where the season remains open until 31 December. From 1996 through 2010, the estimated Unit 1B deer harvest ranged from 34 to 121 animals, while the estimated number of hunters varied from 66 to 186 people. During RY11–RY15, the Unit 1B deer harvest averaged 99, ranging from 87 to 129, while the number of hunters averaged 151 (range 125–172).

Management Direction

Existing Wildlife Management Plans

The original management plan for deer in Unit 1B was *Strategic plan for management of deer in Southeast Alaska, 1991–1995, population objectives* (ADF&G 1991). Changes in the deer management objectives and harvest management strategies have been reported in DWC's species management reports. The plan portion of this report contains the current management plan for deer in Unit 1B.

Goals

The management goal for Unit 1B deer is to maintain healthy, productive populations which are sufficiently abundant and resilient to harsh winters to ensure good hunting opportunities and success.

CODIFIED OBJECTIVES

Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence Uses

The Alaska Board of Game has set the amount of deer necessary for subsistence in Unit 1B at 40–50 deer per year.

Intensive Management

Unit 1B deer have a negative intensive management determination.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

- Monitor deer densities using pellet-group surveys.
- Increase deer populations on winter range (<1,500 ft elevation) to 32 deer/mi^2 (average 1.0 pellet group/20 m^2 plot).
- Monitor the deer harvest using mandatory hunt report cards issued in conjunction with deer harvest tickets.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Population Status and Trend

Relative winter deer densities had historically been measured with spring pellet-group transects in selected areas; however, no pellet-group transects have occurred in Unit 1B since RY03. Deer pellet-group transect efforts have instead been focused in Unit 3, where deer hunting pressure and harvest are greater, and where deer abundance had declined following the deep snow winters of RY06–RY08 (McCoy 2017).

Starting in RY17, aerial alpine deer surveys have been conducted in the Horn Cliffs and Thunder Mountain areas of Unit 1B. The purpose of the surveys is to determine if aerial alpine surveys could provide a better index of deer abundance than traditional pellet-group surveys. Prior to 2011, the Unit 1B harvest was estimated by a regional questionnaire and mailed to a random sample of 33% of deer harvest ticket holders. Since 2011, however, deer harvest data have been derived from mandatory hunt report cards issued in conjunction with deer harvest tickets.

ACTIVITY 1.1 Conduct traditional pellet-group surveys.

Data Needs

Tracking trends in deer abundance in the coastal rainforest environment of Southeast Alaska presents many challenges. A reliable and cost-effective technique is needed for assessing changes in deer abundance over both the short and long term.

Methods

Historically, pellet-group surveys have been conducted along established transects (Kirchhoff and Pitcher 1988) during late April and early May at any of 6 sampling locations in Unit 1B. Each value comparison unit (VCU) has 3 established transects consisting of a straight line of consecutive 3.3 × 65.6 ft (1 × 20 m) plots running uphill from the beach fringe along a compass heading. Transects terminate either at 1,500 ft elevation or after 125 plots have been sampled. Overall transect length, and the number of plots sampled, varies by transect, which in turn depends on topography, the distance from beach to 1,500 ft elevation, and the persistence of snow at higher elevations. Transects are terminated when snow cover approaches 100% for 3 consecutive plots and persists for the remainder of the transect.

Results and Discussion

In spring of RY03, the most recent year in which pellet-group counts were conducted in the unit, 1 VCU at Horn Cliff had a pellet-group density of 0.67 pellet-groups per plot, which was nearly identical to the 0.60 recorded the previous time the area was surveyed in 1998.

Recommendations for Activity 1.1

Discontinue.

The department recommends replacing traditional pellet-group transects with aerial alpine deer surveys to assess trends in deer abundance while also assessing the potential for new methods, such as motion-sensor cameras.

ACTIVITY 1.2 Conduct aerial alpine deer surveys.

Data Needs

A reliable and cost-effective technique for assessing changes in deer abundance over both the short and long term is needed to aid deer harvest management programs in Southeast Alaska. Existing deer monitoring programs (harvest analyses and pellet-group counts) and experimental monitoring programs (e.g. DNA mark-recapture deer pellet analysis) have shortcomings which limit their usefulness for management, planning, and research at the spatial scale of units and subunits.

Methods

Aerial alpine deer surveys were conducted in 1 alpine survey area during RY17–RY19. Survey flights were flown in the period from 20 July through 10 August using a Piper PA-18 Super Cub aircraft. Surveys were designed to be approximately 2 hrs in duration, ending at sunset. Evening surveys were selected over morning surveys because more deer were consistently seen in the evenings per survey hour. Additionally, evening weather was more predictable than morning weather, particularly because of early morning fog.

Pilots and observers counted as many deer as possible while thoroughly covering the survey areas. Unless deer abundance was very high, or deer were in rough terrain and difficult to observe, deer were classified into 4 categories: large buck, small buck, doe, and fawn. Surveys were replicated on 3 to 4 separate evenings to account for variability in the number of deer

observed during individual survey flights. Deer per survey hour was selected as the standard metric for deer abundance.

Results and Discussion

During the RY16–RY20 period, surveys were successfully conducted in the Horn Cliffs and Thunder Mountain survey areas during RY17, RY18, and RY19. A total of 4 survey flights were flown in RY17 and RY18, with 3 total flights in RY19. A high of 87 deer per hour was observed in RY17, 47 in RY18, and 66 in RY19. The aerial alpine deer surveys conducted during this reporting period were the first flown in Unit 1B.

Recommendations for Activity 1.2

Continue when weather and pilot availability allow.

2. Mortality-Harvest Monitoring and Regulations

ACTIVITY 2.1 Analyze deer harvest data from mandatory deer reports.

Prior to 2011, the department estimated Unit 3 harvest data from a regional questionnaire, mailed to a random sample of 33% of deer harvest ticket holders. However, since 2011, deer harvest data have been derived from mandatory hunt report cards issued in conjunction with deer harvest tickets.

Data Needs

Data (e.g. hunter effort, harvest, and deer per hunter days) obtained from mandatory deer harvest ticket hunt report cards currently provide an indirect measure of deer abundance in Unit 1B. Harvest trends can indicate population fluctuations, which are used to inform management decisions. With a positive customary and traditional finding and a corresponding amounts necessary for subsistence use, the Unit 1B deer harvest must be assessed annually to evaluate achievement of this goal.

Methods

Harvest data are summarized by regulatory year. Since 2011, deer harvest data have been derived from mandatory hunt report cards issued in conjunction with deer harvest tickets, rather than by polling a random sample of hunters from each community.

Hunters in Unit 1B are required to obtain general-season harvest tickets before entering the field. Harvest ticket cards include 6 individual harvest tickets. Hunters must validate one ticket immediately after harvesting a deer and at the end of the season complete a mandatory deer harvest report documenting hunting effort and harvest even if they did not hunt. Reports can be completed online[1] or the physical report can be mailed or submitted to department offices. Although harvest ticket reports are mandatory, there is no penalty for not reporting and reporting rates vary by community. Hunters are reminded to report though mail-out and email reminders and public service announcements on local radio. Managers also directly contact hunters who have not reported with the goal of 60% reporting rates for each community. To estimate total

[1] Reports can be completed online at www.hunt.alaska.gov.

harvest in each community, GMU, and the region data from harvest reports are multiplied by an expansion factor to account for nonrespondents.

Once hunt reports have been submitted, hunt and harvest locations are coded for data entry. Hunters often provide vague hunt or harvest locations, in which case an attempt is made to contact them for more precise location data. Once all hunt and harvest locations have been coded and data entry is complete, the results are analyzed and summaries of total harvest, hunter residency and success, harvest chronology, and transportation methods are derived for each unit.

Season and Bag Limit

Season and bag limits for the management area during RY16–RY20.

Unit	Resident and nonresident hunts	Bag limit
Unit 1B	1 Aug–31 Dec	2 bucks

Results and Discussion

Harvest by Hunters

During RY16–RY20, the estimated deer harvest in Unit 1B averaged 103 deer per year, ranging from 82 to 117 deer annually. This represents a slight increase from RY11–RY15 with an average of 99 deer annually (ranging from 87–129; Table 1).

The number of hunters ranged from a low of 127 in RY19 to a high of 176 in RY16 and averaged 157 hunters per year during this report period. The 176 deer hunters in RY16 represent the highest number of hunters since RY98. The number of hunters during the current report period increased slightly over the preceding, with an average of 151 (range 125–172).

Table 1. Unit 1B deer harvest, regulatory years 2011–2020, Southeast Alaska.

	Estimated legal harvest			
Regulatory year	Male	Percent	Unknown	Total
2011	88	(100)	0	89
2012	88	(100)	0	88
2013	87	(100)	0	87
2014	101	(100)	0	101
2015	129	(100)	0	129
2016	117	(100)	0	117
2017	112	(100)	0	112
2018	102	(100)	0	102
2019	82	(100)	0	82
2020	104	(100)	0	104

Hunter Residency and Success

The overall success rate for Unit 1B deer hunters averaged 52% during RY16–RY20, ranging from a low of 47% in RY18 to a high of 58% in RY20 (Table 2). Local residents of Units 1B and 3 represented the largest group of both successful (86%) and unsuccessful hunters.

Table 2. Unit 1B deer hunter residency and success, regulatory years 2011–2020, Southeast Alaska.

	Successful						Unsuccessful						
Regulatory year	Local[a] resident	Nonlocal[b] resident	Nonresident[c]	Unknown	Total	(%)	Local[a] resident	Nonlocal[b] resident	Nonresident[c]	Unknown	Total	(%)	Total hunters
2011	56	3	7	0	66	(53)	44	7	8	0	59	(47)	125
2012	56	3	9	1	69	(50)	57	9	4	0	70	(50)	139
2013	51	0	8	3	62	(39)	66	9	21	0	96	(61)	158
2014	55	12	13	0	80	(47)	70	10	12	0	92	(53)	172
2015	85	2	6	0	93	(58)	50	5	12	0	67	(42)	160
2016	80	8	3	1	92	(52)	65	7	10	2	84	(48)	176
2017	77	4	8	0	89	(53)	67	8	4	0	79	(47)	168
2018	67	8	3	0	78	(47)	72	3	14	0	89	(53)	167
2019	53	3	8	0	64	(50)	44	9	10	0	63	(50)	127
2020	73	4	8	1	86	(58)	51	7	5	0	63	(42)	149

[a] Local residents refers to residents of Units 1B and 3 communities such as Meyers Chuck, Point Baker, and Port Protection.
[b] Nonlocal residents refers to Alaska residents who are not residents of Units 1B or 3 communities.
[c] Nonresident refers to residents of the U.S. who are not residents of Alaska.

During the report period an estimated 61 nonlocal Alaska residents hunted deer in Unit 1B with an overall success rate of 44%, while an estimated 73 nonresidents had an overall success rate of 41%. Deer are more abundant and seasons and bag limits more liberal in nearby units, therefore, those areas attract more nonlocal and nonresident hunters.

Harvest Chronology

While harvest chronology can vary from year to year, generally most harvest in the unit takes place during the rut in late October and November. Hunting deer in alpine habitat is also popular in August (Table 3).

Table 3. Unit 1B deer harvest chronology by month and percent, regulatory years 2011–2020, Southeast Alaska.

Regulatory year	Harvest periods								Number of deer
	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Mar	Unknown	
2011	18	7	18	48	7	0	0	2	89
2012	22	3	13	45	16	0	0	0	88
2013	15	8	20	55	2	0	0	0	87
2014	14	6	26	44	10	0	0	0	101
2015	10	15	17	54	1	0	0	3	129
2016	20	5	30	29	15	0	0	1	117
2017	16	5	10	62	7	0	0	1	112
2018	12	1	8	73	5	0	0	0	102
2019	16	2	24	56	3	0	0	0	82
2020	20	7	20	52	1	0	0	0	104

Transport Methods

During RY16–RY20 most Unit 1B hunters reported using boats to access their hunting areas, followed by highway vehicles, foot travel, and 4-wheelers (Table 4). Logging roads provide some access for highway vehicles and all-terrain vehicles in a few isolated areas, but most of the unit is remote and has no roads.

Other Mortality

In addition to mortality resulting from legal hunting, other sources of deer mortality include severe winter weather, predation by wolves and bears, poaching, injury and accidents, and starvation or natural causes. The department has no estimates of nonhunting mortality during RY16–RY20.

Alaska Board of Game Actions and Emergency Orders

None.

Recommendations for Activity 2.1

Continue.

Table 4. Unit 1B deer hunter effort, percentage days of effort by transport method, regulatory years 2011–2020, Southeast Alaska.

	Percent of effort								
Regulatory year	Airplane	Boat	4-wheeler	Foot	ORV[a]	Highway vehicle	Horse/ dog team	Not specified	Days of effort
2011	2	88	1	2	0	3	1	3	387
2012	0	75	20	2	0	2	0	1	581
2013	0	67	15	4	0	2	1	11	660
2014	0	86	5	0	5	2	0	1	941
2015	0	88	6	3	0	2	0	0	831
2016	0	73	3	20	1	2	0	0	801
2017	1	75	5	9	0	9	0	1	731
2018	1	67	1	4	0	26	0	0	815
2019	4	69	5	5	1	14	0	1	563
2020	<1	60	2	21	0	16	0	1	703

[a] ORV refers to off-road vehicle.

3. Habitat Assessment-Enhancement

No attempt has been made to enhance habitat in Unit 1B specifically for deer. While primarily intended as a silvicultural practice, deer likely derive some benefit from precommercial thinning of second growth stands regenerating from clearcut logging, which can temporarily enhance habitat for deer and moose. The Thomas Bay area was logged 40–60 years ago. Initially, clearcutting can enhance forage for deer and moose. However, within 25 to 30 years, natural forest succession results in regenerating coniferous forest, which shades out forage species.

In March 1997 ADF&G implemented a plan to enhance moose habitat on state land at Thomas Bay. Phase 1 of the plan called for reopening 10 mi of logging roads which were impassable due to dense vegetative growth and downed trees. Road-clearing operations were completed in June 1998. Phase 2 of the plan called for treating 380 acres of dense second growth primarily by precommercial thinning and partial strip clearing. The thinning of four second-growth units, totaling 380 acres, was completed in October 1998. Anecdotal reports from hunters and observations by staff indicate that both moose and deer increased use of these thinned second-growth units as browse production increased and residual thinning slash began to settle and decompose.

NONREGULATORY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS OR NEEDS

Data Recording and Archiving

Pellet-group surveys: All records and data analysis related to deer pellet-group surveys are archived on network servers in the Douglas, Region I office.

Hunt reports: All data derived from deer hunt reports, including annual harvest summaries, are archived electronically in ADF&G's Wildlife Information Network.

Agreements

ADF&G and the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Subsistence Management have agreed to manage both state and federal deer hunting in Unit 1B using state harvest tickets and concurrent season dates and bag limits.

Permitting

Deer hunting in Unit 1B is managed using harvest tickets with an associated hunt report requirement.

Conclusions and Management Recommendations

Unit 1B deer populations exist in isolated pockets and have patchy distribution. With the exception of a few areas, the unit has relatively low deer density (due to typically high snow accumulation and predation) and largely is inaccessible. Unitwide, deer densities vary from moderate in some isolated areas, such as between Thomas Bay and Le Conte Bay, to extremely low in others. Overall, deer populations appear to be stable to increasing with localized variations.

Winter weather, predation, and clearcut logging have the greatest effects on deer population dynamics. Clearcut logging and second-growth stands entering stem exclusion have and will continue to reduce deer carrying capacity in the unit. However, at this time the deer population in the unit appears stable with increases in some areas such as Thomas Bay. The current hunting season and bag limit for deer in GMU 1B appear sustainable.

II. Project Review and RY21–RY26 Plan

Review of Management Direction

Management Direction

Goals

The management goal for Unit 1B deer is to maintain healthy, productive populations, sufficiently abundant and resilient to harsh winters to ensure good hunting opportunities and success.

Codified Objectives

Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence Uses

The amounts necessary for subsistence use of 40–50 deer per year in Unit 1B has been consistently achieved, and there does not appear any need to revise those numbers.

Intensive Management

There is a negative intensive management determination for deer in the unit, and given the relatively low annual harvest, there appears little need to revise this determination.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

Management objectives for RY21–RY25 have been updated to the following:

- Monitor the deer harvest using mandatory hunt report cards issued in conjunction with general season harvest ticket reports.
- Conduct aerial alpine deer surveys annually when pilot availability and weather permit.
- Assess new methods (specifically motion-sensor camera methods) to measure population indices which allow the monitoring of deer population trends.

REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Population Status and Trend

ACTIVITY 1.1 Aerial alpine deer surveys

Data Needs

A reliable and cost-effective technique for assessing changes in deer abundance over both the short- and long-term is needed to aid deer harvest management programs in Southeast Alaska. Existing deer monitoring programs (harvest analyses and pellet-group counts), and experimental monitoring programs (e.g. DNA mark-recapture deer pellet analysis) have shortcomings which limit their usefulness for management, planning, and research.

Methods

No change from RY16–RY20.

2. Mortality-Harvest Monitoring

ACTIVITY 2.1 Analyze deer harvest data from mandatory deer reports.

Data Needs

No change from RY16–RY20.

Methods

No change from RY16–RY20.

3. Habitat Assessment-Enhancement

ACTIVITY 3.1 Browse use surveys.

Data Needs

The department currently has no assessment of where Unit 1B deer populations stand relative to carrying capacity, but much of the unit is remote and supports few deer. It may be desirable to conduct browse use surveys in the Thomas Bay area where sympatric deer, moose, and mountain goats all exert pressure on available winter forage.

Methods

No browse use survey methods have been designed, and no surveys are planned for RY21–RY26.

NONREGULATORY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS OR NEEDS

Data Recording and Archiving

Pellet-group surveys: All records and data analysis related to deer pellet-group surveys will be archived on network servers in the Douglas Region I office.

Hunt reports: All data derived from deer hunt reports, including annual harvest summaries, will be archived electronically in ADF&G's Wildlife Information Network.

Agreements

ADF&G and U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service Office of Subsistence Management have agreed to management both state and federal deer hunting in Unit 1B using state harvest tickets and concurrent season dates and bag limits.

Permitting

ADF&G recommends that deer hunting in Unit 1B should continue to be managed using a harvest ticket and an associated mandatory hunt report requirement.

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