

Furbearer Management Report and Plan, Game Management Unit 3:

Report Period 1 July 2012–30 June 2017, and
Plan Period 1 July 2017–30 June 2022

Stephen W. Bethune



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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 approved for publication by Thomas Schumacher, Regional Supervisor for the Division of Wildlife Conservation.

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Cover Photo: River otters trespass on a private dock in Southeast Alaska. ©2010 ADF&G.
Photo by Alex Von Wichman.

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Purpose of this Report

This report provides a record of survey and inventory management activities for furbearers in Unit 3 for the 5 regulatory years 2012–2016 and plans for survey and inventory management activities in the following 5 regulatory years 2017–2021. A regulatory year (RY) begins 1 July and ends 30 June (e.g., RY10 = 1 July 2010–30 June 2011). This report is produced primarily to provide agency staff with data and analysis to help guide and record its own 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 Division of Wildlife Conservation launched this 5-year report to more efficiently report on trends and describe potential changes in data collection activities over the next 5 years. It replaces the furbearer management report of survey and inventory activities that was previously produced every 3 years.

I. RY12–RY16 Management Report

Management Area

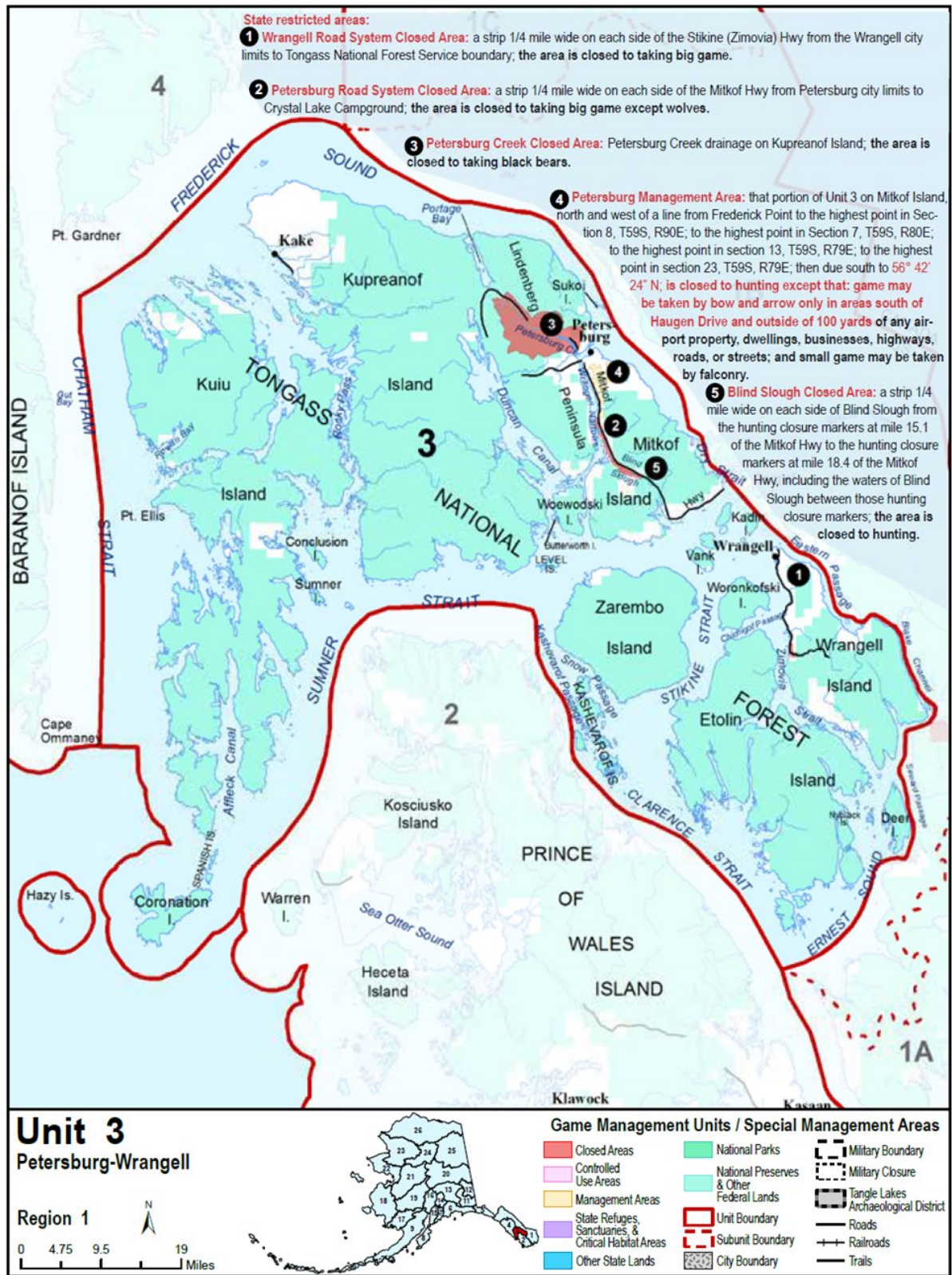
Game Management Unit 3 is an area of approximately 3,000 square miles of islands in the central portion of Southeast Alaska (Fig. 1). These islands in descending order by size are Kupreanof, Kuiu, Etolin, Wrangell, Mitkof, and Zarembo. Smaller islands include several near the mouth of the Stikine River, such as Rynda, Kadin, and Sokolof islands.

Most land area within Unit 3 is within the Tongass National Forest and managed by the U.S. Forest Service, with smaller parcels under tribal, state, and private ownership. In addition to furbearers, moose (*Alces alces*), deer (*Odocoileus hemionius*), wolves (*Canis lupus*) and black bears (*Ursus americanus*) also live in Unit 3. Brown bears (*U. arctos*) are found infrequently on islands adjacent to the mainland.

Elevation within Unit 3 ranges from sea level to nearly 4,000 feet. Predominant vegetative communities occurring at low to moderate elevations (1,500 ft) include Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*) coniferous forest, mixed-conifer muskeg, and deciduous riparian forests. Mountain hemlock (*Tsuga mertensiana*) dominated forests comprise a subalpine, timberline band occupying elevations between 1,500–2,500 feet.

Summary of Status, Trend, Management Activities, and History of Furbearers in Unit 3

Furs, particularly those of sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*), attracted Russians to colonize Southeast Alaska in the late 1700s and early 1800s. Ships from many nations came to the area to trade with Alaska natives for fur. In the early part of the 20th century fur farming was one of the biggest industries in Southeast Alaska. Blue fox (*Vulpes lagopus*), silver fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), and mink (*Mustela vison*) were the primary



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Figure 1. Map of Unit 3 boundaries, Petersburg-Wrangell area, Southeast Alaska.

species raised, but attempts were also made to raise raccoons (*Procyon lotor*), skunks (*Mephtis mephtis*), beavers (*Castor canadensis*), muskrats (*Ondatra zibethicus*), and red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*; Paul 2009). Up to 180 different islands in Southeast Alaska were stocked with foxes by the 1930s. From the 1930s to the 1950s, 5 to 9 fur farms operated on Kupreanof Island. Petersburg was the regional center for the blue fox industry, supporting 60 fur farms located on a nearby island in the mid-1930s (Roppel 1983). The University of Alaska experimental fur farm on Mitkof Island, where researchers studied captive mink, fox, and marten populations, operated from 1936 to 1972. The fox farm industry collapsed during the Great Depression and never recovered. No introduced foxes remain anywhere in Southeast Alaska today. Though fox farming is an interesting historical anecdote of commercial endeavors in Southeast Alaska, the results were disastrous at the time for indigenous fauna and flora (Paul 2009).

Furbearer regulations have remained unchanged in Unit 3 for decades. The last widespread closures were in the early 1900s, with beaver trapping being prohibited from 1913 to 1923, and marten trapping being prohibited from 1915 to 1920 (Lowell 2014).

American marten (*Martes Americana*) are the most important furbearer species in Unit 3, which is true across Southeast Alaska. Of all the furbearers species in Unit 3, marten are targeted with the most trapping effort, provide the most income, and are trapped in the highest numbers. Marten populations fluctuate widely in response to populations of small mammals, particularly long-tailed voles (*Microtus longicaudus*), a primary prey species of marten (Flynn 1993, Flynn and Schumacher 2016). Trapping pressure also influences marten populations to a lesser extent. Marten pelt value averaged \$67.35 during this reporting period (range = \$34.47–\$123.70; Table 1). The number of successful marten trappers appears to be directly correlated to marten pelt prices. For example, from RY12 to RY13, there was an average of 28 successful trappers (Table 2) and pelts averaged about \$100. From RY14–RY16, the number of successful trappers declined to an average of 15 annually (Table 2) while average pelt prices fell to below \$50.

In 2002, a genetic survey was conducted in Southeast Alaska by the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, which found that two marten species, *Martes americana*, and *Martes caurina*, inhabited the region, but *M. caurina* was found on and endemic to only Kuiu and Admiralty islands in Unit 4. As a result of this survey, additional research was initiated in 2005 which documented extremely low numbers on Kuiu as well as a high degree of natural overwinter mortality which is concerning in terms of recruitment and ultimately survival on the island for this species (Flynn et al. 2012).

In addition to natural over-winter mortality, marten on Kuiu Island also have human-caused mortality factors such as timber harvest which reduces important old growth habitat availability, and associated roads which increase trapping access. Also, telemetry location data indicate that marten tend to concentrate along beaches during winter months, where they are similarly vulnerable to shoreline trapping (Lowell 2014). As a result of these conservation concerns, trapping for marten on Kuiu Island has been closed since 2008 and will remain closed until populations increase and a sustainable harvest strategy can be devised.

Table 1. Average furbearer prices for RY06–RY16 based on Fur Harvesters of America auctions 2006–2016 (Fur Harvesters Auction Incorporated 2016).

Species	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Beaver	24.74	21.24	22.00	13.56	12.03	16.54	20.76	24.96	16.63	13.15	9.40
Weasel ^a	7.59	5.92	6.12	4.25	4.86	3.77	4.50	3.80	4.74	4.74	2.72
Fisher	93.38	76.37	64.33	37.84	56.00	41.16	83.47	121.60	78.35	67.83	30.37
Marten	70.40	63.11	91.67	33.33	31.31	44.71	74.48	123.70	57.33	46.77	34.47
Mink	13.31	14.34	12.19	7.90	12.93	18.00	21.72	24.07	9.83	8.75	7.33
Muskrat	7.17	3.94	2.68	3.80	5.85	9.27	9.05	12.15	10.15	4.25	2.07
Squirrel	2.29	1.34	1.67	1.23	N/A	1.06	1.03	0.94	0.66	0.38	0.70
River otter	70.35	49.50	42.58	36.48	30.50	64.22	83.80	86.17	50.34	41.72	21.05
Wolf	211.75	127.62	200.25	151.15	197.95	180.96	198.46	260.45	190.98	108.50	169.04
Wolverine	256.72	246.23	293.95	192.29	246.31	250.47	266.74	260.60	259.23	230.43	218.36

^a Short-tailed and least weasel.

Table 2. Harvest and method of take for marten sealed in Unit 3, Petersburg-Wrangell area, Southeast Alaska, RY12–RY16.

Regulatory year	Total harvest	Successful participants	Percent males	Method of take (%)			
				Shot	Trapped	Snared	Unknown
RY12	204	25	60	0	100	0	0
RY13	239	31	70	0	100	0	0
RY14	196	17	66	0	100	0	0
RY15	171	13	72	0	100	0	0
RY16	116	15	63	0	100	0	0

River otters (*Lutra canadensis*) are common throughout Unit 3 because of the abundant coast lines afforded by the islands of Unit 3. Because river otters are difficult to trap, and pelt preparation is time consuming, prices must be high to substantially influence harvest levels. The average price of river otters for this reporting period was \$56.62, ranging from \$21.05–\$86.17; Table 1). Both otter harvest and trapper participation showed downward trends during this reporting period (Table 3).

Table 3. Harvest and method of take for otter sealed in Unit 3, Petersburg-Wrangell area, Southeast Alaska, RY12–RY16.

Regulatory year	Total harvest	Successful participants	Percent males	Percent juveniles ^a	Method of take (%)			
					Shot	Trapped	Snared	Unknown
RY12	48	13	69	62	8	92	0	0
RY13	57	14	68	33	5	95	0	0
RY14	38	11	75	36	9	91	0	0
RY15	27	8	70	32	0	100	0	0
RY16	26	4	50	53	8	92	0	0

^a Juvenile otter measure (length) <42".

Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) harvests during this reporting period were variable (range 35–77) as well as the number of participants which ranged from 8–14 trappers. Participation appears to be loosely tied to pelt prices, however, in general beaver pelt prices were low throughout the reporting period (range \$9.40–\$24.96; Table 1).

There have been unverified reports of lynx in the past, however their presence has never been verified, and no harvest has ever been documented in Unit 3 (Lowell 2014).

Wolverines, though very uncommon, have been trapped occasionally on Mitkof and Wrangell islands adjacent to the Unit 1B mainland, and there have been unverified reports of wolverine on Kupreanof and Kuiu islands (Lowell 2014). No wolverines were harvested in Unit 3 during this reporting period.

Today, most furbearer trapping is recreational and used as a winter income supplement. Seasons and bag limits have stayed fairly consistent for several decades and most Unit 3 furbearer populations are abundant or common (Parr 2018) and remain stable in suitable habitat. Overall trapping pressure is low to moderate with trapping efforts concentrated near communities. Harvest is well below sustained yield in large portions of the unit. Inland and roadless areas remain largely untrapped and provide refugia for furbearer populations. However, future restrictions on seasons and bag limits may be necessary to ensure sustainable harvests, due to factors such as clear-cut logging, associated increases in road density, and increased trapper access on several Unit 3 islands.

Management Direction

EXISTING WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PLANS

Greater Alaska Furbearer Management Plan in 1976 Species Management Plan (ADF&G 1976).

GOALS

To provide:

1. An optimum harvest of furbearers.
2. The greatest opportunity to participate in hunting and trapping furbearers.

CODIFIED OBJECTIVES

Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence Uses

The Alaska Board of Game has made a positive subsistence finding for furbearers in all units, including Unit 3, with a harvestable surplus to be 90% of the harvestable portion (5 AAC 99.025(13)).

Intensive Management

Not applicable.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

1. Provide information to the Board of Game to further maintenance of viewable and harvestable populations of furbearers.
2. Seal marten, otter, beaver, and wolverine pelts as they are presented for sealing.
3. Contact reliable observers for general information about the status and trends of furbearer populations, including the use of an annual trapper survey.

MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Population Status and Trend

ACTIVITY 1.1.

Record observations of furbearers seen incidentally during other survey work and anecdotal reports from the public.

Data Needs

Incidental observations are insufficient for estimating the population or detecting changes that would trigger management action. Statistical estimates of furbearers derived from a sample-based estimator, including a measure of precision, would be needed to detect change in the population.

Methods

GPS locations and characteristics are recorded for any furbearers observed during other field work. Most observations occur during spring deer pellet, mortality, and body condition surveys. Anecdotal reports are recorded to the maximum level of detail available.

Results and Discussion

None.

Recommendations for Activity 1.1

Continue to actively seek information from trappers and others that observe furbearers.

2. Mortality-Harvest Monitoring and Regulations

ACTIVITY 2.1.

Monitor harvest through sealing records.

Data Needs

Harvest must be assessed to understand the potential impact of furbearer harvest.

Methods

ADF&G staff collected harvest data by sealing hides of marten, otter, beaver, and wolverine from trappers. We recorded location and date of harvest, method of take, transportation mode, and sex. Hides were measured for otter and beaver. Sealing must occur by authorized ADF&G staff or a state appointed sealer within 30 days of the close of the season. These data were then entered into ADF&G's Wildlife Information Network database (WinfoNet) and summarized by regulatory year (RY), which begins 1 July and ends June 30 (e.g., RY15 = 1 July 2015–30 June 2016).

Season and Bag Limit

RY12–RY16 trapping season and bag limit in Unit 3.

Species	Season	Bag Limit
Beaver	10 Nov–Apr 30	No limit
Marten, otter, mink, Weasel, Lynx	1 Dec–15 Feb	No limit
Wolverine ^a	10 Nov–28 Feb	No limit

^a Wolverine season extended from 15 Feb to 28 Feb for RY16.

Results and Discussion

Harvest by Hunters-Trappers

MARTEN

During this reporting period, harvest averaged 185 marten annually for this reporting period ranging from 116–239 animals (Table 2). Approximately 20 trappers participated each year ranging from 13–31 individuals. Males averaged approximately 66% of the harvest.

OTTER

Harvest ranged between 26 and 57 for this reporting period (Table 3). The 5-year average from RY12–RY16 was 39. Otters were both trapped and shot during this reporting period, where on average, 6% of otters were shot and 94% were trapped. Participation level showed a decreasing trend from 14 trappers in RY13 to 4 in RY16. Male harvest averaged 68% and juvenile harvest accounted for 44% of the harvest.

BEAVER

Beaver harvest ranged from 35–77 for this reporting period (Table 4). The 5-year average harvest was 48 beavers. Traps were the main method used, and the proportion of juveniles in the harvest was low, except in RY16 when the harvest was 70% juvenile beavers. On average, 10 trappers target beavers annually in Unit 3. Sex ratio of the harvest is unknown due to the difficulty of determining sex with beavers.

Table 4. Harvest and method of take for beavers sealed in Unit 3, Petersburg-Wrangell area, Southeast Alaska, RY12–RY16.

Regulatory year	Total harvest	Successful participants	Percent juveniles ^a	Method of take (%)			
				Shot	Trapped	Snared	Unknown
RY12	55	14	25	0	98	2	0
RY13	77	12	35	1	88	11	0
RY14	37	8	21	0	100	0	0
RY15	35	7	41	0	100	0	0
RY16	38	10	70	0	100	0	0

^a Juvenile beavers measure (length + width) ≤ 52 ".

WOLVERINE

There were zero wolverines harvested in Unit 3 during this reporting period. Two were reported in the previous 5-year report period (Lowell 2014).

OTHER SPECIES

There are no harvest data for mink and weasels due to the absence of sealing requirements.

Harvest Chronology

December is the peak month for trapping all species in Unit 3, followed by January and then February for both marten and river otter (Table 5). During this reporting period, in December, January, and February marten harvest represented 55, 31 and 14 percent of the total harvest, respectively, and otter harvest represented 40, 34 and 26 percent of the total harvest respectively. Beaver harvest was more variable and unpredictable in timing which is understandable given the low number of participants, the long season, and winter ice conditions.

Table 5. Marten, river otter, and beaver harvest chronology, Unit 3, Petersburg-Wrangell area, Southeast Alaska, RY12–RY16.

Species	Regulatory year	Month								<i>n</i>
		Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	
<i>Marten</i>										
	RY12	0	0	0	108	67	29	0	0	204
	RY13	0	0	0	93	84	62	0	0	239
	RY14	0	0	0	116	66	14	0	0	196
	RY15	0	0	0	112	44	15	0	0	171
	RY16	0	0	0	82	28	6	0	0	116
<i>River otter</i>										
	RY12	0	0	0	18	18	12	0	0	48
	RY13	0	0	0	33	16	8	0	0	57
	RY14	0	0	0	10	14	14	0	0	38
	RY15	0	0	0	4	8	15	0	0	27
	RY16	0	0	0	14	11	1	0	0	26
<i>Beaver</i>										
	RY12	0	0	10	7	6	6	23	3	55
	RY13	0	0	24	39	10	0	2	2	77
	RY14	0	0	3	9	7	1	2	15	37
	RY15	0	0	19	11	0	3	2	0	35
	RY16	0	0	3	25	3	2	1	4	38

Transport Methods

Trappers in Unit 3 use boats as the primary mode of transportation, with the exception of beaver trappers, who primarily use highway vehicles (Table 6).

Alaska Board of Game Actions and Emergency Orders

At the 2013 Board of Game (BOG) meeting, a proposal was passed allowing trappers to take beaver with a firearm in Southeast Alaska. At the 2015 BOG meeting, a proposal was passed lengthening the wolverine trapping season from 10 November–15 February to 10 November–28 February. At the March 2016 Statewide BOG meeting, the board rescinded the requirement that a trapper's permanent identification had to be displayed either by marking traps and snares, or by posting a sign nearby.

Recommendations for Activity 2.1.

Continue.

Table 6. Marten, river otter, and beaver harvest by transport method, Unit 3, Petersburg-Wrangell area, Southeast Alaska, RY12–RY16.

Species	Regulatory year	Airplane	Foot	Boat	3 or 4-wheeler	Snow-machine	Highway vehicle	Unknown	<i>n</i>
<i>Marten</i>									
	RY12	0	2	103	10	60	26	3	204
	RY13	1	0	93	71	2	71	1	239
	RY14	0	0	60	40	0	96	0	196
	RY15	0	1	92	44	0	34	0	171
	RY16	0	14	61	23	9	9	0	116
<i>River otter</i>									
	RY12	0	0	43	0	0	5	0	48
	RY13	0	0	44	0	0	13	1	57
	RY14	0	0	32	1	2	3	0	38
	RY15	0	0	21	1	2	3	0	27
	RY16	0	0	26	0	0	0	0	26
<i>Beaver</i>									
	RY12	0	0	18	11	6	20	0	55
	RY13	0	0	2	14	6	54	0	76
	RY14	2	0	0	4	1	30	0	37
	RY15	0	0	2	4	0	29	0	35
	RY16	0	0	9	4	6	16	0	35

3. Habitat Assessment-Enhancement

Not Applicable.

NONREGULATORY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS OR NEEDS

Data Recording and Archiving

- Data sheets are scanned and stored on the DWC server (S:\Offices\Petersburg\Furbearer) and the local area biologist's hard drive.
- Original data sheets are stored in file folders located in the Petersburg Area Biologist's office.
- Historical survey notes and data sheets are being digitized and scanned for permanent storage on the file server.

Agreements

None.

Permitting

None.

Conclusions and Management Recommendations

It is impractical to set harvest and population objectives for furbearers without any data on population levels. Quantifiable management objectives need to be established for marten, river otters, beavers, and wolverines. Harvest information is available for all these species from sealing records, and application of existing and emerging methodologies may provide opportunities to monitor population trends.

Despite the lack of population information and quantifiable management objectives, harvests appear to be within sustainable limits. The general approach in Unit 3 for furbearer management has been to expect populations to self-regulate the effects of trapping. This approach has been successful and will continue to be used. No changes in seasons or bag limits are recommended at this time.

II. Project Review and RY17–RY21 Plan

Review of Management Direction

MANAGEMENT DIRECTION

The existing management direction and goals appropriately direct management of furbearers in Unit 3. The management direction for Unit 3 ensures that furbearers will persist as part of the natural ecosystem and ensures continued trapping (on applicable species) and viewing opportunities. There is no indication that the long-term sustainability of the furbearer populations or that statewide goals (ADF&G 1976) for human uses cannot be met; therefore, the Unit 3 management direction should continue to be that furbearers will be managed in a manner that

complements the statewide furbearer management goals. There are no area-specific issues in Unit 3 that require a departure from statewide goals for furbearer management. Furbearers are not currently managed smaller than a Unit scale.

GOALS

To provide:

1. An optimum harvest of furbearers.
2. The greatest opportunity to participate in hunting and trapping furbearers.

CODIFIED OBJECTIVES

Amounts Reasonably Necessary for Subsistence Uses

The Alaska Board of Game has made a positive subsistence finding for furbearers in all units, including Unit 3, with a harvestable surplus to be 90% of the harvestable portion (5 AAC 99.025(13)).

Intensive Management

Not applicable.

MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

- Regulate seasons and bag limits to maintain viewable and harvestable populations of mink, marten, and river otters.
- Seal harvested marten, beaver, river otter, and wolverine pelts.

REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

1. Population Status and Trend

ACTIVITY 1.1.

Record observations of furbearers seen incidentally during other survey work and anecdotal reports from the public.

Data Needs

Incidental observations are insufficient for estimating the population or detecting changes that would trigger management action. Statistical estimates of furbearers derived from a sample-based estimator including a measure of the precision would be needed to detect change in the population.

Methods

GPS locations and characteristics will be recorded for any furbearers observed during other field work. Most observations occur during spring deer pellet, mortality, and body condition surveys. Anecdotal reports will be recorded to the maximum level of detail available.

2. Mortality-Harvest Monitoring

ACTIVITY 2.1.

Monitor harvest through sealing records.

Data Needs

Harvest must be assessed to understand the potential impact of furbearer harvest.

Methods

Harvest data from hide sealing records of marten, beaver, otter, and wolverine taken by trappers will be collected. Sealing records will include date of harvest, method of take, transportation mode, and sex. Hides will be measured for otters and beavers. Sealing must occur by an authorized ADF&G or a state appointed sealer within 30 days of the close of the season. These data are entered into an ADF&G's Wildlife Information Network database (WinfoNet). Harvest data were summarized by regulatory year (RY), which begins 1 July and ends June 30 (e.g., RY15 = 1 July 2015–30 June 2016).

3. Habitat Assessment-Enhancement

Not Applicable.

NONREGULATORY MANAGEMENT PROBLEMS OR NEEDS

Data Recording and Archiving

Data collected during surveys will be recorded on data sheets and transcribed into the furbearer observations spreadsheet located on the Petersburg server.

Agreements

None.

Permitting

None.

References Cited

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