

FINDINGS OF THE BOARD OF GAME
IMPLEMENTATION OF WOLF POPULATION REDUCTION
IN GAME MANAGEMENT UNIT 20A

During the publicly convened Board of Game meeting on November 9 - 19, 1992, the board heard public testimony, staff reports and advisory committee reports and discussed the management of caribou, moose, sheep, wolves and other species in Game Management Unit 20A. Included in the board's discussion were re-evaluations of biological and human use information presented to the board over the past decade, and review and consideration of the Strategic Wolf Management Plan for Alaska and associated Area-Specific Wolf Management Plans and Implementation Plans under development with unprecedented public participation since November, 1989. Based on all the testimony and reports, and after due consideration of public review and comment the board finds that:

1. Unit 20A is one of the most important areas for use of wildlife in Interior Alaska and has a history of high consumptive use of moose, caribou and sheep by the public. Extensive use of the area by resident of Fairbanks and nonresident hunters contributed to most of the unit being considered by the Joint Boards as a nonsubsistence use area. Management of Unit 20A to provide for high levels of use is important to reducing conflicts between residents for subsistence resources in other parts of Alaska. For example, the recent closure of hunting of the Delta Caribou Herd greatly increased hunting pressure in Units 12 and 20E.
2. Moose, caribou and sheep populations in Unit 20A are valued resources of the public. It is consistent with the public interest to manage these populations for high, sustained use by application of sound principles of wildlife management. The population and harvest objectives established by the board in the final Area Specific Wolf Management Plan for Southcentral/Interior Alaska which are incorporated here by reference, are consistent with the public demand. These objectives are reasonable, are within the carrying capacity of the habitat and are attainable using sound principles of wildlife management.
3. The Delta Caribou Herd has declined by more than 50% and the Dall sheep population in Unit 20A has declined by more than 40% over the past two years. These declines are believed to have been initiated by adverse weather conditions, but have been accelerated by predation. The majority of predation on caribou is by wolves. The wolf population is at an historic high level, estimated at 265

wolves in the fall of 1991. Hunting of the Delta herd was progressively restricted between 1986 and 1991 and was closed in 1992. Hunting of Dall sheep has been restricted to mature rams and has no measurable effect on population trends. Further restrictions in hunting of caribou are not possible and further restrictions on hunting of sheep will not reverse the declines in these populations.

4. The moose population in Unit 20A is stable or slowly increasing, but available harvest is below the management objective levels. Wolf predation is a significant factor limiting the harvestable surplus of moose in Unit 20A.

5. Although bear predation is also known to occur, past management of grizzly bear populations has reduced the effect of bears on the population dynamics of moose and caribou in Unit 20A. Management of wolf predation is the most effective tool remaining to address the status of moose, caribou and sheep populations in Unit 20A.

6. The department's application of a "pulsed" management approach to wolf predation is based on five factors that will be used to determine whether it is appropriate to consider wolf population reduction. These factors are: calf:cow ratios, population trends, projected allowable harvests of prey species, climatic severity and prey:wolf ratios. These factors are relevant and measurable and provide a rational basis for making management decisions and are consistent with the public desire for management that allows for some natural variability in predator numbers over time.

7. Data collected and presented by the department on Delta caribou, moose and wolf populations in Unit 20A demonstrate that all five factors indicate that wolf population reduction is necessary to achieve management objectives for the Delta caribou herd.

8. The wolves that inhabit Denali National Park are a valued resource of the people of Alaska and the United States. It is important to protect these wolves from the effects of any wolf control program in Unit 20A. The creation of Zone 2 lands in the lower Yanert River and Healy Creek drainages and continued coordination of biological surveys between the state and the National Park Service will adequately protect these wolves from hunting, trapping and control.

9. The Implementation Plan for Unit 20A was developed consistent with 5AAC 92.110. The exclusion of all military lands within Unit 20A from the control area will prevent any conflict with military interests and negates the need for permission from the military to control wolves on their lands.

10. The proposed reduction of wolf numbers in Unit 20A was reviewed by professional wildlife biologists outside the department. These

biologists concluded that the proposed reduction will have no adverse impact on the viability of wolves in the unit. Extensive evidence from Alaska and the Yukon documents that wolf populations can withstand the level and duration of control proposed. Prior experience in Unit 20A confirms that the wolf population in Unit 20A will recover from the level of reduction proposed within a relatively short period of time. Specifically, following reduction to a level of 60 to 80 wolves in all of Unit 20A in the late 1970's and early 1980's, the population recovered to pre-control levels by the late 1980's and is now higher than ever previously documented. It is anticipated that following termination of control, the population will again increase to high levels.

11. The proposed reduction of wolf numbers in the Unit 20A Wolf Predation Control Area will have little adverse effect on the reasonable opportunity for subsistence use of wolves in Unit 20A. Once the population objectives are met this opportunity should improve.

12. Alternative to a wolf population reduction program are not likely to achieve levels of wolf harvest necessary to allow the Delta Caribou Herd to increase to desired objectives within the foreseeable future. Wolf harvests by hunting and trapping over the past 10 years have averaged less than 20% of the population. This harvest is below the maximum sustainable level for a wolf population with the prey base that exists in the area and is not sufficient to reduce the population. "Land and shoot" taking could contribute to department efforts to reduce wolf numbers in portions of Unit 20A, but these areas are either military land excluded from the control area or are too close to Denali National Park to allow public participation in removal efforts. An experimental program of diversionary feeding of predators in the range of the adjacent Macomb caribou herd failed to increase caribou calf survival. Aerial shooting of wolves by department personnel is the most effective, efficient, humane and selective method available to accomplish the program objectives.

13. The department has developed this implementation plan based on sound principles of wildlife management, consistent with the constitutional and statutory mandates for sustained yield management. The Implementation Plan for Unit 20A was developed with extensive public participation. This plan is consistent with the Strategic Wolf Management Plan for Alaska adopted by the board on October 30, 1991 and the Area-Specific Wolf Management Plan for Southcentral and Interior Alaska adopted by the board on November 16, 1992. Reduction of wolf numbers to benefit the depressed Delta Caribou Herd is supported by a wide range of interests including the Fairbanks Fish and Game Advisory Committee and the Northern Alaska Environmental Center.

14. This plan will maximize the likelihood of success in reaching the program objectives and will provide the department with

invaluable knowledge of the biology and ecology of wolves that cannot be obtained in any other way. The data gathered from this program will become an important part of the expanding knowledge base used by wildlife managers to provide benefits to the resource and people. This program, in conjunction with other programs authorized by the board will provide the opportunity to explore alternative management strategies for future application.

15. All oral testimony, written comments, staff reports, and previous board findings were considered and incorporated by reference.

Adopted November 18, 1992.



Richard Burley, Chair
Alaska Board of Game