

**Wildlife Restoration MULTI-YEAR GRANT  
INTERIM PERFORMANCE REPORT**

ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME  
DIVISION OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION  
PO Box 115526  
Juneau, AK 99811-5526

**Alaska Department of Fish and Game  
Wildlife Restoration Grant**

**GRANT NUMBER:** AKW-B-R4-2020

**PROJECT NUMBER:** 3.0

**PROJECT TITLE:** Region IV Caribou Management S&I program: The Status of Alaska Caribou and Factors Influencing Their Populations in Central/Southwest Alaska

**PERIOD OF PERFORMANCE:** July 1, 2019 through June 30, 2020

**PERFORMANCE YEAR:** FY20

**REPORT DUE DATE:** September 2020

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Todd A. Rinaldi

**COOPERATORS:** Dave Crowley, Heidi Hatcher & Tim Peltier

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Authorities: 2 CFR 200.328  
2 CFR 200.301  
50 CFR 80.90

**I. PROGRESS ON PROJECT OBJECTIVES DURING PERFORMANCE YEAR**

**OBJECTIVE 1: Population Size, Status, and Trend.** Assess the size and status of each population to determine the five-year trend.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

*Northern Alaska Peninsula Herd (Unit 9)*

- Conduct surveys via helicopter during October to assess fall composition.

Extremely poor weather conditions for flying and observing caribou repeatedly delayed and finally shutdown all but the northern segment of the NAP composition survey. Twenty of thirty-three collared cow caribou and observed and 1,203 were classified.

Southern Alaska Peninsula Herd (Unit 9)

- Conduct surveys via helicopter during October to assess fall composition.

The SAP could not be accessed during this reporting period due to poor weather

Unimak Herd (Unit 10)

- Conduct surveys via helicopter during October to assess fall composition.

Unimak Island was inaccessible during this reporting period due to poor weather.

Mulchatna Herd (Unit 9, 17, 18 and 19)

- Conduct aerial photo census to estimate herd size.

A photo survey was completed this performance period to obtain a Rivest estimate of the MCH population. Sixty-seven of the 69 collared animals were located over a 7-day period that comprised both pre-survey and survey dates. To accomplish this goal, we continue to conduct more intensive pre-survey flights to ensure that the MCH were aggregating appropriately for a photo survey attempt and to obtain a more precise and accurate population estimates. Total fixed-wing flight time was 104 hours,

- Conduct sex and age compositions surveys via helicopter during spring to assess parturition, and again in October to assess fall composition.

A fall composition survey of the MCH was conducted on 10–12 October 2019. Three thousand four hundred and ninety-six caribou were classified (~25% of the population). The bull-to-cow ratio exceeds our objective again however the calf-to-cow ratio was below our objective of 30:100 following the one of the highest ratios observed in 2018. The eastern portion continues to exceed objectives. In looking at the historical data, there is quite a bit of fluctuation year to year in this metric which is typical of other interior and southwest Alaska caribou herds. Fall flights required approximately 20 hours of fixed-wing time and 15 hours of helicopter flight time.

Due to staffing and pandemic related issues, no spring surveys were completed this reporting period.

- Conduct captures during April to provide a collared sample of caribou for surveys and survival studies.

Due to staffing and pandemic related issues, no spring captures were completed this reporting period.

Nelchina Herd (Units 11, 14A, 14B, & 13)

- Conduct aerial photo census/survey to estimate herd size.

On 2 July 2019, a photo survey of the NCH was completed requiring 36.5 hours of fixed-wing flight time. The final minimum count was 53,500 caribou which is above the population objective.

- Conduct sex and age compositions surveys via helicopter during mid-summer to assess calving and again in October to assess fall composition.

On October 5<sup>th</sup>, the fall composition survey was conducted in Units 11 & 13. A total of 4,791 animals were categorized during the survey. Sex and age ratios remain healthy and above objective. Four hours of fixed-wing and 5 hours of helicopter flight time were required to complete this activity.

In Unit 14A&B composition surveys only occur in fall. Four hundred and eighty-one caribou were classified. Since last performance period yearling caribou are no longer classified to keep reporting consistent between years. Seven hours of fixed-wing and 5 hours of helicopter flight time were required to complete this activity.

**OBJECTIVE 2: Mortality/Harvest Monitoring and Regulations.** Assess the number of caribou harvested by hunters and other sources of mortality that might have an impact on each population.

Southern Alaska Peninsula Herd (Unit 9)

- Monitor hunting and other mortality factors through harvest reporting, public contacts and field observations.

In Unit 9D 52 caribou were harvested by 71 hunters. This harvest is below objectives.

Northern Alaska Peninsula Herd (Unit 9)

- Monitor hunting and other mortality factors through harvest reporting, public contacts and field observations.

In Units 9C&E, 58 caribou were harvested by 79 Tier II subsistence permits. This harvest is below objective.

Unimak Herd (Unit 10)

- Monitor hunting and other mortality factors through harvest reporting, public contacts, and field observations.

Three permits were issued by the Federal Subsistence Board. The state season remains closed due to population concerns.

Mulchatna Herd (Unit 9, 17, 18 and 19)

- Monitor hunting and other mortality factors through harvest reporting, public contacts, and field observations.

Region IV staff visited 3 local villages in July to issue caribou permits during this reporting period. Two thousand one hundred and ten permits were issued for state and federal hunts yielding 125 reported caribou harvested. A considerable number of hunt reports remain unreturned. This hunt was closed early in January due to conservations concerns.

Nelchina Herd (Units 11, 13 14A, & 14B)

- Monitor hunting and other mortality factors through harvest reporting, public contacts, and field observations.

In Unit 13 2,866 caribou were harvested by 5,741 reported hunters. No state harvest occurred in Unit 11. This year staff travelled to the Denali Highway and conducted hunter interviews in September.

Under draw permit, 52 caribou were harvested in Units 14A&B by 92 hunters (165 permits).

- Track radio-collared individuals periodically to assess survival and mortality rates.

Caribou collared with satellite/GPS technology are monitored regularly through desktop monitoring and auto-generated collar report received monthly. Caribou with VHF collars were monitored monthly from October through June via fixed-wing aircraft (40 hours)

**OBJECTIVE 3: Habitat Enhancement /Assessment.** Assess the nutritional status of the caribou population directly or indirectly where it is feasible.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Mulchatna Herd (Unit 9, 17, 18 and 19)

- Capture approximately 20 calves in April each year to collect weight and morphometric data to aid in conducting population condition assessments and deploy radio collars to monitor movements.

Due to staffing and pandemic related issues, no spring captures were completed this reporting period

- Monitor general movement of caribou to and from seasonal ranges through reconnaissance flights using both very high frequency (vhf) and satellite telemetry.

Caribou collared with satellite/GPS technology are monitored regularly through desktop monitoring and auto-generated collar reports received monthly. Caribou with VHF collars were monitored monthly from October through June via fixed-wing aircraft (~55 hours) to monitor movement and survival.

- Conduct parturition surveys during peak calving to determine pregnancy rates of age specific collared female caribou, as well as age at first reproduction.

Parturition surveys were completed over the course of 3 days in May. Sixty-four cows were located of which 75% were pregnant. The survey required of approximately 36 hours of fixed-wing aircraft flight time.

Northern Alaska Peninsula Herd (Unit 9)

- Capture approximately 20 calves in April each year to collect weight and morphometric data to aid in conducting population condition assessments and deploy radio collars to monitor movements.

Twenty-eight caribou were captured and collared with radio-collars during this reporting period. Fifteen hours of helicopter and 49 hours of flight time was needed to complete.

Nelchina Herd (Units 11, 14A, 14B, & 13)

- Capture approximately 20 calves in October to collect weight and morphometric data to aid in conducting population assessments and deploy radio collars to monitor movements.

Over the course of a day and a half, 20 caribou calves were captured, assessed, and radiocollared requiring a combined total of 15 hours of helicopter and fixed-wing time.

- Monitor general movement of caribou to and from seasonal ranges through reconnaissance flights using both very high frequency (vhf) and satellite telemetry.

Collared calf are monitored regularly through monthly tracking flights from October through June via fixed-wing aircraft (~55 hours) to monitor movement and survival.

- Conduct parturition surveys during peak calving to determine pregnancy rates of age specific collared female caribou.

A parturition survey was completed over three days in early June 2020 requiring 28 of fixed-wing flight time to track 53 collared adult cows.

#### **OBJECTIVE 4: Caribou Management with Public Participation and Outreach.**

Manage each caribou population with an emphasis on engaging the public through public meetings, working groups, educational materials, and incentive

##### ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

- Finalize five-year regional caribou management operational plans.

All Caribou Management Reports and Plans have been published. The final report and plan addressing the Nelchina Caribou herd is currently under review.

- Provide information to state and federal regulatory processes on caribou management.

All information collected is used to inform state and federal regulatory processes. Outside of common communication with our federal counterparts there were federal proposals and special action addressing caribou during this reporting period. Staff compiled and presented biological, population, and hunting information at 12 Advisory Committee meetings, 6 Regional Advisory Council meetings, Subsistence Resource Commission meetings, 3 Federal Subsistence Board meetings and native corporations. There were no state Board of Game proposal addressing caribou in Region IV during this reporting period.

Mulchatna Herd (Units 9 & 17)

- Review documents, materials such environmental impact statements for proposed Pebble Mine and provide feedback.

Within Region IV, review of Pebble-related and EIS documents regarding terrestrial wildlife and specifically, the MCH, were completed by the Dillingham Area biologist, King Salmon Area Biologist, and Regional Management Coordinator. Review required addressing comments and identifying conservation concerns in writing and in person. Region IV staff attended 5 Pebble Mine-related meetings during this reported

**II. SUMMARY OF WORK COMPLETED ON PROJECT TO DATE.**

We have met most of our objectives during FY20 however weather events and poor sampling conditions continue to present obstacles to conducting robust surveys across the region. Many staff were teleworking from home as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Logistical issues related to the COVID pandemic did affect our ability to complete some activities, however we were able to provide additional efforts without travel on the MCH and NCH caribou herds. This resulted in exceeding the Personal Services and Commodities allocations leaving the Travel allocation unused.

**III. SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENT REPORTS AND/OR AMENDMENTS.**

None during this reporting period.

**IV. PUBLICATIONS**

Alaska Department of Fish and Game. 2020. Annual report to the Alaska Board of Game on intensive management for caribou with wolf predation control in Game Management Units 9B, 17B&C, and 19A&B, the Mulchatna caribou herd. Division of Wildlife Conservation, Juneau.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game. 2020. Annual report to the Alaska Board of Game on intensive management for caribou with wolf predation control in the Northern Alaska Peninsula, Game Management Units 9C and 9E, Northern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd. Division of Wildlife Conservation, Juneau.

**V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THIS PROJECT**

Expenditures deviated from the original grant submission because of the following:

- In early 2020, a human virus (now named SARS COV2 or COVID19) caused a global pandemic. While much of the work accomplished was similar to the previous year staff were challenged with working remotely under telework agreements, postponing some

critical field work, and altering work plans in an effort to protect employee health. The ADFG Commissioner also mandated a 50% cut in travel.

- As a result of the global pandemic, the USFWS WSFR office approved extending the grant another year and we are reporting for year 1.
- Staff in Region 4 are also being reminded to code time to individual projects as they conduct work by species.

The total operating budget available to each region is determined by Divisional leadership. At times, a region must take a more broad-based approach to budgeting with the understanding that they may then move funds across grant projects throughout the year as project needs arise. For example, the bulk of Region 4's travel and supplies budget was allocated to Caribou S&I and Coordination, to be dispersed to other species' projects if needed. This approach, while allowing needed spending flexibility, sometimes results in larger than anticipated discrepancies between grant requests and actual expenditures.

To rectify the challenge of budgeting specifically per individual species' survey & inventory projects, the Region 4 grant will be restructured to create an operating grant that encompasses all survey, inventory, and coordination activities for all species into one project (the new TRACS reporting platform allows for this type of restructure). This should alleviate any budget/expenditures discrepancy problems in the S&I projects while still maintaining maximum flexibility.

We recommend continued funding for this project in order to effectively manage caribou populations in Central/southwest Alaska.

**Prepared by:** Todd A. Rinaldi, Regional Management Coordinator

**Date:** 8/27/2020