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Game board says yes to aerial shooting of wolves

By [Tim Mowry](#)

Published Saturday, March 8, 2008

For the first time in more than 20 years, the Alaska Department of Fish and Game will shoot wolves from helicopters as part of its statewide predator control program.

The Alaska Board of Game late Thursday approved a plan that calls for department staff to shoot approximately 25 wolves from a helicopter on the southern Alaska Peninsula to help save the Southern Alaska Peninsula Caribou Herd, which has dropped from a high of 10,000 caribou in 1983 to a population of 600 animals.

“We have a chance to rescue an important caribou herd before it disappears, and we need to do it very soon,” board chairman Cliff Judkins said during debate on the proposal. “If we don’t act now, this herd could disappear.”

While the game board has approved the use of helicopters for other predator control plans, the state has not employed the practice of having snipers kill wolves from helicopters since 1985 on the Minto Flats, department spokeswoman Cathie Harms said.

The department plans to kill the wolves sometime in the next two months before the caribou begin calving. To not act quickly would be “irresponsible” on the department’s part, said Doug Larsen, director of the state’s Division of Wildlife Conservation.

“We’d like to do this as soon as we possibly can,” he said. “This is a serious conservation issue.”

Unlike other predator control areas in the state, where private pilots and gunners get permits to shoot wolves from planes, that isn't possible on the remote Alaska Peninsula, Larsen said. There are few pilots in the area, and the weather prohibits flying most of the time, he said.

"From the information we've gotten, there are no other options we have available other than helicopters," Larsen said, noting that federal and state agencies in the western United States use similar programs to control the number of coyotes preying on sheep and cattle.

Game board member Dick Burley said the only other option was "to get the feds to poison them like they do the rats," in reference to efforts by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to get rid of invasive Norway rats that have begun to show up on the Aleutian Islands and could threaten migratory bird populations.

The state currently has aerial wolf-control programs in five different parts of the state and private pilot-gunner teams have killed almost 800 wolves in the last five years in those areas.

The plan approved by the board on Friday for game management Unit 9D has a five-year shelf life.

How animal-rights groups will respond to the state's newest predator control plan remains to be seen. Several lawsuits have been filed against the state by different groups concerning its predator control efforts, including one that is still being decided.

Tom Banks, the Alaska representative for Defenders of Wildlife, one of the groups involved in prior lawsuits against the department, was at the meeting but didn't have a comment on the plan because he hadn't had a chance to study it, he said.

But both Burley and Larsen said the plan for Unit 9D was "surgical" and meets the conditions opponents of predator control have raised with other programs.

"One of the things opponents of our present predator control programs always say is that they would support predator control if it's done by department staff with helicopters in a biological emergency," Burley said. "It's time to put up or

shut up.”

Even more disconcerting than the dramatic drop in the population of the Southern Alaska Caribou Herd is the fact that virtually no calves have survived in the herd the last two years, despite relatively high pregnancy rates of around 70 percent, area management biologist Lem Butler said. Biologists counted only two calves in the entire herd last fall and just four calves the year before that.

Judging from what biologists can tell, wolves are responsible for the bulk of the poor calf survival, though grizzly bears also may be a factor. There are an estimated 50-80 wolves in Unit 9D, Butler said.

The plan calls for removing about 25 wolves from two to four packs on the herd's calving grounds. Though the herd ranges extensively on federal lands in the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, its calving grounds are on state lands where predator control can be conducted. Federal agencies have refused to allow the killing of wolves on any federal lands in Alaska.

The department is mandated to take steps to boost the herd because it has been identified as an intensive management population important for human consumption and subsistence. Residents in several villages in the area hunt the herd.

Board of Game OKs Elimination of 2 Dozen Wolves

ALASKA PENINSULA: Aerial action aimed at saving caribou calves

James Halpin / Anchorage Daily News / March 8, 2008

About two dozen wolves from several packs that prey on an Alaska Peninsula caribou herd will be killed by airborne state wildlife officials because the herd is teetering toward extinction, according to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

Between two and four wolf packs in Game Management Unit 9D -- extending roughly from Port Moller to False Pass on the Aleutian arc -- are keeping the southern Alaska Peninsula herd's numbers from rebounding after years of decline, according to Fish and Game officials. The herd, which had an estimated 10,000 animals in 1983, now has about 600.

Though it is unclear exactly how many wolves are in the area, about 25, or a minimum of 20 percent, are scheduled for destruction beginning as early as this spring, said wildlife biologist Cathie Harms, speaking by phone from the Board of Game conference in Fairbanks, where the board made its decision Thursday night.

"Usually in predator control programs, attempts are made to remove entire packs," Harms said. "Whether or not that's the case here remains to be seen."

While the adult population in the herd is reportedly healthy, calves are unable to survive long enough to replace older animals because the wolves have been killing newborn calves in calving grounds before they are mobile, Harms said. The actual number of wolves killed will depend on how many wolves are stalking the calving grounds, she said.

The primary goal of this aerial predator control operation will be to give the calves a chance to survive and replenish the herd, which is an important one for subsistence users and currently can't sustain a harvest, Harms said. Fish and Game staffers will use a helicopter to spot and kill the wolves from the air, the first time such an operation has been undertaken since the mid-1980s, Harms said.

A survey of the herd in 2006 discovered only one calf per 100 cows, according to Fish and Game. That number decreased to 0.5 calves per 100 during a thorough survey conducted last year, Harms said.

TIME PRESSURE

"Time is of the essence in this particular case," she said. "We've already lost two calf crops. We've had two years of no calves being added to the population."

While brown bears -- also numerous in the area -- are of concern as well, they do not kill as many calves as wolves do, she said.

The caribou herd ranges extensively onto the federal lands of the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, where predator control can not be conducted; however, most calving takes place on state land, where it can.

Throughout the effort, the wolf and caribou populations will be monitored as officials try to strike the right balance that will allow the herd to grow without killing more wolves than necessary, Harms said.

"There's never been a predator control program in the state of Alaska that's caused wolf packs to be threatened or endangered," she said. "They may be absent from an area for a relatively short period of time but they immigrate back in from surrounding areas at a very fast clip."

In other cases, wolves have bounced back to pre-control levels in about three to five years, she said.

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