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Palin's Active Management/Airborne Shooting Bill By Mark Richards

Governor Palin has introduced a bill that would completely revamp how our wildlife management decisions are made and liberalize control techniques for three predators: wolves, bears, and wolverine.

The ostensible rationale of this "Active Management/Airborne Shooting" bill — SB176/HB 256 — is to prevent frivolous lawsuits from anti-hunting and other groups by making the state's predator management programs "legally defensible."

As a longtime hunter and trapper, I can understand the frustration many feel every time our predator management programs are challenged in court. I don't agree with most of these lawsuits that cost our state and various agencies so much time and money. Often these suits *are* frivolous. And they rarely succeed. So there is a real need to change our statutory language regarding wildlife management so that every single controversial predator control program can't be challenged in court.

But this bill goes too far. The "cure" in this bill is much worse than the "disease." If this bill passes it would:

- Legalize for the first time the airborne shooting of black and grizzly bears by the public
- Remove mandates that our Board of Game receive and duly consider input from the Department of Fish and Game before making management decisions
- Remove definitions currently in statute that define when, where, and why predator control actions can take place in order to boost ungulate populations

This bill essentially gives all future authority for any predator management decisions solely to our politically-appointed Board of Game. The Board would not have to base any future decisions regarding predator management on "science," on the opinions of ADF&G biologists and managers, or on what constitutes certain biological parameters like "harvestable surplus." Indeed, this bill removes every single "constrictive definition" currently in our Intensive Management law to the point that a future Board could decide we need to engage in the aerial shooting of grizzly and black bears, and there is not a thing that I, or you, or anyone else could do to challenge that.

One of the analogies going around is that this is the equivalent of the medical establishment lobbying for a new law that would prevent any future medical malpractice suits. Many of us are upset with the frivolous malpractice suits that raise our insurance premiums and drive the cost of health-care up, but would we ever want a system whereby no one could ever sue for malpractice? Even in the worst case scenarios?

Supporters of this bill claim that it would remove existing mandates that require the Board to impose predator control programs when game population and/or harvest objectives aren't being met, thus giving more latitude to the Board *not* to impose those programs.

Indeed, this is true. But that is only one side of a double-sided coin. The flip side gives the same latitude to any future Board to do whatever they deem necessary to meet those population and harvest objectives, like basing decisions on "all hunter demand" so that hunters are guaranteed a "high probability of success."

Basically, this bill says "trust us" to make the right decisions. Trust us to define "high probability of success" in ways that don't in future turn Alaska into a virtual game farm. Trust that we won't ever engage in the aerial gunning of bears even though we are legalizing it now. Trust us to the point that you can't ever stop us in the courts. Ever!

As an avid hunter deeply involved in promoting prudent wildlife management that is grounded in moderation instead of extremism, I simply don't have that kind of trust, and I hope most of you reading this now feel the same. I strongly urge you to get involved, contact your state legislators, and oppose SB 176/HB 256 before it is too late.

Bio: Mark Richards is co-chair of Alaska Backcountry Hunters and Anglers.