

Wolf Control Expansion Plan is Shortsighted at Best

By Mark Richards

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Earlier this May, the Alaska Board of Game voted to expand wolf-control over the entire range of the Fortymile Caribou herd. From the Chena and Salcha rivers to the Goodpaster and Fortymile rivers, from the Taylor Highway to the Steese Highway, wolf populations are to be “reduced” by 75-80% via aerial gunning over approximately 18,750 square miles. That’s the area of New Jersey and Maryland combined.

Along with expanded wolf control, the Board also expanded lethal control of grizzly bears in the Fortymile River region. Plans call for a 60% reduction of grizzly bears over about 4,000 square miles.

As a longtime, and current, subsistence hunter, fisher, and trapper, I strongly oppose this predator control program. It goes way too far. It is much too extreme. This is an issue of the supply (of caribou) not meeting the demand (of hunters). It’s shortsighted at best to simply increase the supply of caribou at any and all costs.

Back in the Vietnam War there was a saying that we had to “destroy the village in order to save it.” In essence, this is the logic of the Fortymile Caribou herd predator-control plan.

The goal of this extreme wolf and bear-control program is to increase the size of the Fortymile Caribou herd from the current estimate of ~42,000 animals to between 50,000-100,000 animals, with the objective leaning toward the higher number. Along with an increase in herd size is a requirement for an increased hunter harvest of caribou. The goals command a hunter harvest between 1,000 and 15,000 caribou annually. Not just for subsistence hunters in Alaska seeking to put meat on the table, but also for non-resident hunters looking to put antlers on their wall.

ADFG statistics used to bolster the need for the predator control plans state that “during 2001-2004, 2449-3427 hunters annually harvested 693-864 caribou.” Averaging this out, about 3,000 hunters (both residents *and* non-residents) already harvest about 780 caribou each year.

According to the 2005 ADFG Caribou Management Report, over the last three years the most common transport method used by successful caribou hunters for the *entire* Fortymile Caribou herd’s range within Alaska was atvs (aka 4-wheelers: 37%) and orvs (heavier land vehicles: 4%), and this figure averaged 41% of all successful hunters.

This mode of hunter access has become such a mounting problem that ADFG management reports for the Fortymile region have this to say: “Our primary concern is the increasing amount of hunters.... In combination with the increasing number of hunters, increasing access is a growing management concern, especially by hunters who use 4-wheelers.”

If it now takes 3,000 hunters to annually harvest 780 caribou, just how many hunters will it take to harvest 2,000 caribou? How many hunters will it take to harvest 8,000 caribou, which is the median harvest goal?

Extrapolating the hunter success rates published by ADFG, it would take about 6,000 hunters to harvest 2,000 caribou, and it would take over 10,000 hunters to harvest 8,000 caribou.

And 41% of those successful hunters will be using atvs and orvs to access the backcountry, exponentially compounding a problem already known to exist, because the caribou are not going to conveniently line up by the side of the road each season so hunters can harvest them with minimal environmental impact. And if we were to curtail atv and orv access, hunters couldn't possibly harvest the required number of caribou.

If atv and orv access is such a “growing management concern,” how does it make sense to ensure such a huge increase in this type of access? Can the habitat realistically be expected to absorb these kind of hunter numbers and means of access without widespread and long-term damage?

I don't think it can, and it's just one (among many) of the reasons I oppose this program. Unfortunately, I seem to be in the minority among hunters. Rod Arno from the pro-hunting Alaska Outdoor Council called these expanded predator control changes “wonderful.”

I hope other hunters will join me in putting some common sense back into what “pro-hunting” really means and what we as hunters stand for. The role of the hunter is grounded in conservation and stewardship and respect for the land and animals. Not in extreme plans to “grow more caribou” at any and all costs.

I am Mark Richards, Co-Chair of Alaska Backcountry Hunters and Anglers. I don't think these changes are wonderful. We need your support to turn things around.

Thank you.

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