

PROPOSAL 25

5 AAC 92.108. Identified big game prey populations and objectives.

Review the intensive management findings for Unimak caribou and determine objectives if applicable:

5AAC 92.108 Identified big game prey populations and objectives.

Caribou Herds	Finding	Population Objective	Harvest Objective
...			
Southern Alaska Peninsula Unimak Island	Positive	1,500–4,000	150–200
	<u>Negative</u>		
<u>Or</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>1,000–1,500</u>	<u>20–150</u>
....			

What is the issue you would like the board to address and why? Historically the Unimak Island caribou herd (UCH) was considered part of the Southern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd (SAP), therefore the population and harvest objectives from 5 AAC 92.108 above applied to the combined mainland and island herds. As biologists learned more about herd distribution, movement, disparate calving areas, and genetics, it became apparent that the two herds were separate. In the last decade movement between these herds, based on collared caribou monitored in both herds, has been almost nonexistent. The ADF&G Division of Wildlife Conservation maintains separate population and composition monitoring of the two herds, and therefore recommends distinguishing between the two herds in regulation. No survey and inventory management objectives are in place for the UCH; however, currently-recommended objectives under the Intensive Management (IM) Plan in 92.112 (expires May 2020), define a minimum population of 1,000 caribou, a ratio of 35 bulls:100 cows, and annual harvest of 100–150 in combination with the SAP.

Options to manage predator populations on Unimak Island are limited because most lands are designated federal wilderness. Unsuccessful negotiations with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to allow wolf control on federal lands ended in court decision upholding federal restrictions on wilderness lands. The UCH population remains below the population and harvest objective set in the IM plan, numbering approximately 430–460 caribou; however, the herd began increasing recently at a rate of about 10% per year. Bull- and calf-to-100 cow ratios exceeded IM objectives in 92.112(c)(4)(D)(i-ii) as of fall 2018 (80 bulls and 44 calves per 100 cows) without predation control. Annual wolf harvest by hunters and trappers is 3.1 wolves, 62% of which are taken by nonresident bear hunters. Wolf harvest has been encouraged by waiving the nonresident tag fee (2010) and providing liberal seasons and bag limits (2009). The UCH has remained closed to caribou hunting since 2009 except for limited subsistence hunting of three bulls allowed recently on federal lands. Although calf mortality studies indicated that brown bears were important predators of neonates, an IM program for bears was not considered possible on Unimak. Habitat is not considered a limiting factor on the island.

False Pass, population 46, is the only community on Unimak Island. False Pass residents have reported limited hunting activity on the UCH and SAP in the last two decades. Reported cumulative UCH harvest from 1997 to 2008 was 117 (range of 0–19 annually), only 11 of which were by False Pass residents, an average of 0.9 killed per year for the community. The number of UCH hunters who reported from False Pass ranged from zero to eight, with an average of 1.4 hunters per year during that period. Although False Pass residents have boat access to the SAP, no hunting participation in state hunts was reported on the SAP during the recent six years that state hunts have been open and liberalized. Izembek National Wildlife Refuge staff issues federal subsistence permits to False Pass residents and reported that recent subsistence harvest on the SAP ranges from one to six per year. Reported caribou harvest by False Pass residents on the UCH and SAP, combined, does not meet the criteria in 92.106(1)(A)(i) caribou: 100; and level for hunter demand is low (92.106(1)(D)).

The SAP is recognized as an intensive management population. IM programs for the SAP were approved by the Board of Game (board) in 2008, successfully implemented, and allowed to expire in 2017. Intensive management population objectives established for the SAP (listed above) are still relevant and should remain unchanged. The SAP population size is approximately 2,700 and since 2012 has been increasing at an average of about 9.7% with a liberal season and bag limit to encourage hunter participation. Reported harvest remains low at 40–50 per year because of remoteness and difficult access but is increasing slowly as guides and hunters find their way in.

If the board’s finding is negative under 92.108 for the UCH, then the chapter addressing the Unimak Wolf Management Area in 92.112 should be repealed from regulation. If the UCH receives a positive finding, a revision to the IM plan in 92.112 will be necessary. The recommended management objectives and harvest strategy, derived from the 2010 UCH Operational Plan, are as follows:

Population Objectives

- Population size: 1,000–1,500
- Minimum bull-to-cow ratio: 35 bulls:100 cows
- Minimum cow-to-calf ratio: 20 calves:100 cows

Harvest Objectives

- Annual Harvest: 20–150

PROPOSED BY: Alaska Department of Fish and Game

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