

FINDINGS OF THE BOARD OF GAME

IMPLEMENTATION OF WOLF POPULATION REDUCTION IN THE UPPER TANANA/FORTY MILE CONTROL AREA OF GAME MANAGEMENT UNITS 12, 20B, 20D AND 20E

During the publicly convened Board of Game meeting on November 9 - 19, the board heard public testimony, staff reports and advisory committee reports and discussed the management of caribou, moose, wolves and other species in the Upper Tanana/Fortymile area of Units 12 and 20. Included in the board's discussion were re-evaluations of biological and human use information presented to the board over the past decade, and review and consideration of the Strategic Wolf Management Plan for Alaska and associated Area-Specific Wolf Management Plans and Implementation Plans under development since November, 1989. Based on all the testimony and reports, and after due consideration of public review and comment the board finds that:

1. The Fortymile caribou herd (FCH) is a biological resource of significant value to the residents of Alaska and other citizens of the United States and Canada. Excessive harvest by past generations, combined with natural environmental factors, reduced the FCH to approximately 6,000 caribou in the mid-1970's. While the herd has increased under conservative harvest management to healthy status with a herd size of approximately 22,000, the FCH remains well below its maximum estimated historic level of more than 500,000 animals.
2. The current size of the FCH adversely affects the biological diversity and abundance of interrelated components of the ecosystem within the potential range of the FCH to the detriment of wildlife species and people. The current herd size is not sufficient to assure the ability of the population to increase naturally during periods of favorable environmental conditions at rates necessary to provide for the best interests of the people of Alaska, Canada and the United States.
3. The current herd size which is less than 4% of its historic high and the current low growth rate of the FCH are not sufficient to meet reasonable demands for consumptive and nonconsumptive use. At the greatly reduced herd size the FCH inhabits less than 20% of its former range, which once spanned from Fairbanks, Alaska to Whitehorse, Yukon. People who depend on the FCH for nutritional needs have had limited opportunity to harvest caribou for food. People who wish to view the wildlife spectacle of massive Fortymile caribou migrations are unable to do so because of the small size of

the herd. The local economy suffers from the lack of cash that would be brought into the communities by people coming to view or hunt the FCH.

4. The goal of restoring the FCH to its historic range in portions of Units 12, 20B, 20D, 20E and 25C in Alaska and the adjacent Yukon Territory of Canada through management of harvest and predation is widely supported by the people of Alaska and Yukon. It is in the best interest of the FCH, its ecosystem and the public to restore this herd to abundance. The management objective to increase the FCH to 60,000 caribou by the year 2000 is reasonable and attainable through sound wildlife management and is within the carrying capacity of the habitat.

5. The harvest objectives of allowing a maximum annual harvest of 3% of the herd (including no more than 1.5% of the females in the herd) during periods of population growth in excess of 10% per year, with lower allowable harvests during periods of stability or decline, insure that human harvest of the FCH will have no measurable effect on its rate of recovery. The harvest objectives provide a reasonable balance between the needs of Alaskans for continued consumptive use of the FCH and the desires of others to suspend all human harvest during the period of herd recovery. Further restrictions on harvest are not biologically needed and would create additional hardship for local residents and other Alaskans.

6. The potential growth of the FCH is limited by wolf predation. Unless the level of wolf predation on the FCH is reduced, desired growth rates of the FCH for the benefit of the ecosystem and humans cannot be assured.

7. The Upper Tanana/Fortymile (UTFM) moose populations within portions of Units 12, 20D and 20E are valued biological resources. These moose populations are currently below the size necessary to provide for the best interest of the public.

8. The current size and productivity of the UTFM moose populations are significantly below the nutrient/climate limit and below the optimal population size necessary to meet reasonable demands for consumptive and nonconsumptive use. Alaska residents who depend on moose in this area for nutritional needs have limited opportunity to obtain moose. People who wish to observe moose in their natural habitat are unable to do so because of the low density of the population. The local economy suffers from the lack of cash that would be brought into the communities by people coming to view or hunt moose.

9. The management goals of increasing the UTFM moose populations and its use by people through management of harvest, habitat and predation are strongly supported by local residents who are dependent upon the UTFM moose populations for nutritional needs.

The population objective of 9,000 to 10,000 moose and the annual harvest objective of 300 to 650 moose are reasonable and attainable through sound wildlife management, and are within the capability of the habitat and are consistent with sustained yield management.

10. The size and productivity of the UTFM moose populations are limited by wolf predation. Although bear predation also occurs, and was formerly a greater source of mortality, management actions taken to liberalize bear harvest over the past decade have reduced the level of bear predation on moose. Unless the level of wolf predation on UTFM moose is reduced, desired growth of the populations for the benefit of the ecosystem and people is not expected.

11. Recent wildfires in the range of the UTFM moose populations have created large expanses of high quality habitat which are currently under-utilized. The vegetation essential for maximum productivity of moose populations changes due to succession. Unless management actions are taken to stimulate moose population increases, the potential value of the habitat due to recent fires will be lost through seral succession.

12. The Upper Tanana/Fortymile (UTFM) wolf population is a biological resource valued by the public. The healthy status of the UTFM wolf population is not threatened by the proposed reduction to 40-75 wolves in the Upper Tanana/Fortymile Wolf Predation Control Area for the 5-year period, 1993-1998. Extensive evidence from this area and across Alaska and in the Yukon conclusively demonstrates that wolf populations are capable of withstanding the projected level and duration of wolf reduction. Wolf numbers can be expected to recover to a level equal to the pre-control level within a relatively short period of time when the control program is terminated. In the long term, a larger wolf population is anticipated and can be supported by the increased prey populations. The projected increase in wolf numbers following recovery of the Fortymile caribou herd and UTFM moose populations will enhance the value of the wolf population to all people with an interest in these wolves. The long-term gains in wolf and prey abundance outweigh any short-term effects of a temporary reduction of wolf numbers.

13. In particular, the Board of Game finds that the proposed reduction of wolf numbers in the Upper Tanana/Fortymile Wolf Predation Control Area will have no adverse effect on the reasonable opportunity for subsistence use of wolves in any portion of Units 12 or 20. Current subsistence wolf harvest is limited in this area and no changes in seasons or bag limits which would reduce the reasonable opportunity to take wolves for subsistence uses are expected to result from the proposed temporary wolf reduction. Further, local residents participating in a survey of opinions through a department questionnaire regarding wildlife management in this area strongly supported reduction of wolf

numbers to stimulate moose and caribou population increases, even if that meant the opportunity to hunt or trap wolves would be temporarily reduced.

14. The department will not remove wolves or wolf packs that are known to spend the majority of their time within the boundaries of Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, even when those wolves are located outside the Preserve. The department will not remove any wolf or wolves located within 10 miles of the Preserve unless there is knowledge that the majority of that animal's range is outside of the Preserve. To the greatest extent possible, this strategy will attain the program objectives while avoiding any impact on the healthy (as required by federal law) status of the wolf population in the Preserve. Any incidental effect on the wolf population in the Preserve will be minimal and short term. In the long term, the wolf population within the Preserve will benefit from the increased natural abundance of caribou migrating to and through the Preserve as a result of control actions outside the Preserve. Any burden on the national interest in wolves in the Preserve is minimal in relation to the immeasurable local and national benefits that will result from restoration of the FCH to its former abundance.

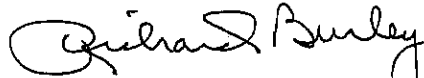
15. No alternative to a wolf population reduction program will allow the Fortymile Caribou Herd and UTFM moose populations to increase to desired objectives. Harvest by hunting and trapping will not reduce the wolf population. Wolf harvests by hunting and trapping over the past 10 years have averaged less than 15% of the population. This harvest is below the maximum sustainable level for a wolf population with the prey base that exists in the area. The vegetation and terrain prevent "land and shoot" taking from being an effective method of taking wolves. An experimental program of diversionary feeding of predators in the range of the adjacent Macomb caribou herd failed to increase caribou calf survival. Diversionary feeding to benefit moose is too costly to apply over the UTFM Wolf Predation Control Area. Aerial shooting of wolves by department personnel is the most effective, efficient, humane and selective method available to accomplish the program objectives.

16. The department has developed this implementation plan based on sound principles of wildlife management, consistent with the constitutional and statutory mandates for sustained yield management. This plan is consistent with the Strategic Wolf Management Plan for Alaska adopted by the board on October 30, 1991 and the Area-Specific Wolf Management Plan for Southcentral and Interior Alaska adopted by the board on November 16, 1992. This plan will maximize the likelihood of success in reaching the program objectives and will provide the department with invaluable knowledge of the biology and ecology of wolves that cannot be obtained in any other way. The data gathered from this program

will become an important part of the expanding knowledge base used by wildlife managers to provide benefits to the resource and people.

17. All oral testimony, written comments, staff reports, and previous board findings were considered and incorporated by reference.

Adopted November 18, 1992



Richard Burley, Chair
Alaska Board of Game