



Wolf Management in Alaska with an Historic Perspective

**Presentation to the Alaska Board of Game
March 2002**

by

**Wayne L. Regelin, Director
Division of Wildlife Conservation
Alaska Department of Fish and Game**

Public attitudes toward wolf management, and wolf control in particular, are based on deeply held values. Conflicts between people with divergent values have fueled the controversy for decades, and I expect this will not change. Some people and organizations have no desire to understand and accept the values of others on this issue. This conflict of values makes setting wildlife policy difficult.

Most Alaskans are proud that we have large and healthy wolf populations, and many recognize that we have a special responsibility to manage wolves to ensure their continued abundance. Wolves do have an impact on moose and caribou populations, and this impact, in combination with factors such as severe winter weather or bear predation, can depress moose and caribou populations to very low levels leaving little harvestable surplus for humans.

Man has the ability to influence this system by reducing wolf populations and allowing ungulate populations to recover from depressed levels. The controversy centers on whether — or when and how — it is appropriate for man to decrease wolf numbers to increase ungulate harvests.

Brief History of Predator Control in Alaska

In the 1940s and 50s, widespread wolf control occurred through poisoning, bounties, and aerial shooting by federal agents. The first aerial shooting began in 1948 and was conducted, primarily by federal agents, until the late 1950s when aircraft became more common.

These efforts resulted in low wolf and bear populations and high populations of ungulates. However, poisoning and public aerial gunning are no longer viable options because they are illegal and unacceptable to a large majority of Alaskans.

Following statehood in 1959, one of the first actions of the legislature was to prohibit poisoning of predators. Shortly thereafter, bounties were stopped. In 1963, the Board of Fish and Game classified the wolf as a big game animal and a fur animal, the first official recognition of the wolf as a valuable species.

Aerial shooting of wolves by the public became common in the 1960s and was widespread from 1967 until early 1972. The department ceased issuing aerial shooting permits in 1972 after passage of the federal Airborne Hunting Act.

Concurrent with the cessation of aerial shooting of wolves, much of interior Alaska experienced severe winters with deep snow in 1970-71 and 1971-72, resulting in sharp declines in many moose populations. Without aerial shooting, wolves increased and prey populations continued to decline. Many people and organizations demanded that the department control wolves to help the moose populations rebuild.

In response, the Board of Fish and Game authorized wolf control in Game Management Unit (GMU) 20(A) in February 1975. This was challenged in court on grounds that an environmental impact statement was required for any action on federal lands. After three years, federal court ruled in the state's favor, but wolf control was conducted in 20A during this time.

In 1978 the ANILCA debate was in full force and focused increased attention on Alaska. In March of 1979, the board authorized wolf control in game management subunits 19(A) and 19(B) and in two parts of GMU 21. Several groups filed actions in federal court, stopping all efforts until 1980 when the state again won the court case. The department proceeded with wolf control programs in six areas in 1980-81 and five areas in 1981-82.

In the spring of 1982, wolf control opponents filed a complaint with the state ombudsman claiming the state violated the Alaska Administrative Procedures Act and the board must authorize wolf control by regulation, not policy. The ombudsman agreed that regulations were required. In response, the Board of Game adopted a policy in March 1984 that all wolf control authorizations must be done by regulation, thus assuring public input. The board met again in August of 1984 and authorized wolf control in GMU 12 and subunits 20(A) and 20(B), but only by department staff and with the aid of radio-collars.

In December the Federal Communications Commission ruled the department could not use radio telemetry to locate wolves as part of a wolf control program. This decision was overturned, but it generated tremendous controversy nation-wide about the ethics of wolf control.

In January of 1985, five bills were introduced in the Alaska legislature on the subject of wolf control. They ranged from a total ban to requiring wolf control if a local Fish and Game Advisory Committee thought it was necessary. None of these bills passed, but they kept the issue before the public and in the press.

Steve Cooper became Governor in December of 1986. He prohibited all wolf control for the duration of his four-year term. But this did not stop the controversy and confrontations. It merely shifted attention to the practice of land-and-shoot taking of wolves, which had remained a legal method.

A court suit was filed in 1986 to stop land-and-shoot taking of wolves, claiming it was de facto wolf control. The Alaska Supreme Court ruled in favor of the State in 1989, allowing the practice to continue.

Because the land-and-shoot issue was so controversial, the Board addressed it on two occasions. In November of 1987 they restricted land and shoot hunting to 7 GMU's where it was an effective management tool, and in November 1989 they required permits, issued by the department, for same-day-airborne (SDA) hunting of wolves.

In 1989, the department tried a new approach to resolve the long-standing issue of wolf control. We proposed the concept of developing a statewide wolf management plan using a stakeholder process. We hoped a strategic plan built with a lot of public involvement had the potential to defuse the issue and allow development of a stable wolf management policy.

The board agreed, and we selected team members, hired a facilitator and developed a charter for the group. Twelve citizens, representing a wide variety of wildlife values, served on the team. The team included advisory committee members, Alaska Natives, the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, Alaska Outdoor Council, National Audubon Society, hunters, trappers and the environmental community at large. The first meeting was held in November 1990, and a final team report completed in June 1991.

Key points of consensus were:

1. The wolf population in Alaska is abundant and secure.

2. Wolves in Alaska are highly valued by people for many purposes
3. Wolves are capable of limiting the abundance or productivity of prey.
4. No single management regime can be applied across the state to accommodate all legitimate human values.
5. Some form of zonal management system offers the best chance to address conflicting values.

The team did not reach consensus on two critical issues:

1. Whether same-day-airborne hunting of wolves by the public should be allowed.
2. The circumstances under which wolf control by department personnel would be acceptable and how control should be implemented.

Near the end of the planning process, leadership of the department changed. This produced a subtle, but fundamental, shift in the department's perspective. Governor Hickel appointed leaders that strongly supported wolf control as a means of increasing ungulate harvest by humans. The new administration was less willing to share authority for decision-making with a planning team.

No effort was made to have the team try to reach consensus on the two critical issues of when wolf control was acceptable and how it should be implemented.

In November 1991, the draft wolf management plan was presented to the board and adopted as board policy. At that meeting, the board also prohibited the practice of land-and-shoot by requiring shooters to be at least 100 yards from their planes. This board action ended legal land-and-shoot hunting of wolves by the public. The board expected aerial wolf control by department personnel to replace land-and-shoot hunting and become the standard method to reduce wolf numbers where it was necessary.

In March 1992, the board endorsed wolf control in three large areas, GMUs 12 and 20E, GMU 20(D) near Delta and GMUs 11, 13 and 14, and asked the department to prepare implementation plans for these areas. In November the board approved all three implementation plans.

Public reaction was immediate and strong. The department and the Governor received over 100,000 letters and phone calls objecting to wolf control. A tourist boycott was initiated. Alaska's wildlife management policies were debated and bashed nightly on national TV.

Governor Hickel reconsidered, and Commissioner Rosier invoked a moratorium on the program until a wolf summit of state and national interest groups could meet and discuss the issue. The summit was held in Fairbanks in mid-January 1993. It only provided a forum for various factions to fight in public. The Board of Game met one week later and rescinded most elements of the strategic plan and all of the implementation plans.

In June 1993, the board held a special meeting on wolf management. It revised the strategic plan and changed the title to The Wolf Conservation and Management Policy for Alaska. This is still the board's guiding policy. At that meeting the Board also re-authorized wolf control in subunit 20A and called for ground-based wolf control using trapping. The department implemented this action in the fall of 1993, and 98 wolves were taken by department personnel.

The department began a second year of trapping in November 1994. Video footage of a wolf in a snare was obtained and received substantial national publicity, all negative.

Tony Knowles was inaugurated as Governor on December 4, 1994 and moved quickly to suspend the wolf control program. A few weeks later, he called for a review of the department's wolf management program by the National Academy of Science. This year-long review concluded that wolf control could be effective in some circumstances, the department's wolf management program was based on sound science, and wolf control would be costly and controversial.

Based in part on the [NAS report](#), Governor Knowles established three basic principles that must be met before wolf control could proceed. Any control program:

1. Must be based on sound science.
2. Must be cost effective.
3. Must be broadly acceptable to the public.

Adhering to these three principles and following a year-long citizen participation planning effort, the department implemented a non-lethal wolf control program to rebuild the Forty-mile Caribou herd. Beginning in November 1997 and extending to April 2001, the department sterilized the alpha males and females in wolf packs in the control area and moved subdominant wolves to other locations. The caribou population increased from 22,000 to 38,000 during this period. The degree to which the wolf control program contributed to the increase in caribou is still being evaluated.

This non-lethal program was controversial, but not nearly to the extent of lethal programs. The planning group that recommended the non-lethal control program included members from environmental groups, animal welfare interests, Alaska Natives, hunters, and trappers. This team developed the management recommendations and helped inform the public about the program and why it was wise wildlife management. Only one organization, the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, withdrew from the process when implementation was imminent. They tried to rally public opposition to the effort, but were not successful.

In 1994, the legislature passed and Governor Hickel signed the intensive management law. This statute says the highest and best use of most big game populations is to provide for high levels of harvest for human use. Under this law, the board may not significantly reduce the harvest level through regulatory action, such as season lengths and bag limits, unless the board has adopted or scheduled for adoption at the next regular meeting, regulations that provide for intensive management.

The board may decide not to adopt intensive management regulations if it determines that intensive management would be:

1. Ineffective based on scientific information,
2. Inappropriate based on land ownership, or
3. Against the best interest of subsistence uses.

In 1998, the legislature amended the intensive management law by requiring the board to establish population and harvest goals and seasons for intensively managed big game populations, and redefining “harvestable surplus,” “high levels of human harvest” and “sustained yield.”

Subsequently, the board completed the process of identifying big game prey populations and setting population objectives and harvest goals for each population.

In 1996, an initiative related to wolf management was placed on the ballot and passed by Alaskan voters. The initiative prohibited same-day-airborne hunting of wolves, coyotes and foxes by the public. Prior to the initiative, a person who had been airborne that day could take a wolf, but the person had to be at least 100 yards from the aircraft prior to shooting. The initiative also set standards the department had to meet before implementing a wolf control program. These standards required the Commissioner to find that an emergency existed before conducting wolf control and defined “emergency” as an irreversible decline of the prey population. Fifty-nine percent of voters favored the initiative.

In 1998, the legislature modified the statute adopted by the ballot initiative. It removed reference to an “irreversible decline.” The amended and still current language allows the department to conduct wolf control if the commissioner finds that predation is an important factor contributing to a low or declining prey population and that a reduction in predation can reasonably be expected to result in aiding an increase in the prey population

In 1999, the legislature passed a bill allowing the public to shoot wolves the same day they had been airborne, but only in areas where the board had authorized predator control. This action reversed a key element of the law adopted by ballot initiative in 1996. The governor vetoed the bill. The legislature overrode the veto. Another ballot initiative, which passed in November 2000 (53% in favor), again prohibited same-day-airborne hunting of wolves in areas authorized by the board for wolf control

Since 1995, under terms of the intensive management law, the Board of Game has authorized wolf control in five areas where ungulate populations have declined to low levels. The non-lethal program in the range of the Forty-mile caribou herd is the only program that has been implemented.

Some individuals and groups are angry that the department has not conducted wolf control in the other areas where the board has authorized action. Others are pleased and continue to work hard to insure that wolf control is not conducted again.

GMU 19D East Adaptive Wildlife Management Plan

The area that has received the most attention and been the most controversial is near McGrath, often referred to as "GMU 19(D) east." The density of the moose population is low in this area, and local residents are not able to harvest enough moose to meet their needs.

The Governor appointed a six-person adaptive wildlife management planning team in 2000 to study this issue and make recommendations to the department and the board to rebuild the moose population. This planning team provided recommendations to the department in February 2001. The department then used those recommendations to develop a management plan. This plan would have reduced wolf and bear predation in a small area, called an experimental micromanagement area (EMMA). Moose hunting would have been prohibited in the EMMA until the population recovered. The board endorsed the team's recommendations in March 2001 and the department's management plan in June 2001. A fall 2001 moose population estimate found a higher than expected moose population in the area, prompting a re-evaluation of the management plan. To date, no action has been taken to implement the predator control portion of the plan.

The adaptive wildlife management planning team recommendations have resulted in increased efforts to collect biological data in the McGrath area. Moose population estimates were made in February 1999, November 2000 and 2001. Wolf populations were estimated in 1995, 1997 and 2001. A moose calf mortality study was conducted in 2001 and will continue in 2002. The level of biological information necessary to make management decisions continues to be a controversial subject.

In summary, great efforts have been made since 1990 to develop a lasting wolf management policy for Alaska. The department and the board have tried to develop a policy that recognizes the importance of the wolf to Alaska, recognizes the widely divergent values people have about wolves, and allows wolf populations to be regulated when necessary to maintain the ability of people to harvest moose and caribou. To date, all such efforts have either failed or been inconclusive, and the issue is as controversial as ever.

Conclusions

In my opinion, some general conclusions that can be drawn from this history are:

1. The department will never again conduct widespread and continuous wolf control to increase ungulate populations. The monetary costs are too high and the public does not want their wildlife to be managed in that manner.
2. Wolf control by department personnel may be possible in small areas to help restore moose or caribou populations. In order to gain public acceptance, it will be necessary to have citizen participation in a planning process, guided by reliable scientific information.
3. Public acceptance is more easily gained if non-lethal methods of wolf population reduction are used, but this practice is probably not feasible in most places in Alaska.
4. A statewide planning effort, as was done in 1990, is unlikely to be productive. Such a plan can only provide general guidelines for wolf control. We must address each area individually with a planning team that includes local residents.

5. In most places in Alaska, local residents and other hunters must reduce predator populations on their own, through legal means of hunting bears and hunting and trapping wolves. The board and department will need to consider seasons, bag limits and methods needed to reach to this goal, as part of an overall wildlife management strategy.
6. The intensive management statutes are difficult to use and time consuming. Their emphasis on predator control is contradicted by public opinion, as represented through successful ballot initiatives.
7. Wolf management is complex, because sociological considerations are more influential than biological information. The majority of the American public and a sizeable proportion of the Alaskan public do not want the department to undertake wolf control.
8. The public supports department and board actions that recognize and provide for a diversity of wildlife values and uses. One way the board has demonstrated this balanced view has been to provide viewing opportunities by protecting wolves. The department will continue to support providing for appropriate viewing opportunities.
9. The public has an important and legitimate role in managing public resources. We must continue to discuss predator and prey management objectives with a broad-based public.
10. In many areas, bears are an important predator on moose calves. Due to a variety of biological and sociological factors, this complicates predator-prey management.