

Defenders of Wildlife

Protect America's Wildlife (PAW) Act



Aerial Gunning FAQs

In 1971, Congress passed the Airborne Hunting Act (AHA) to prohibit the hunting of wildlife from aircraft. But for years now, the state of Alaska has attempted to circumvent the intent of the AHA. The state's actions violate the intent and purpose of the law and there is concern that other states may soon follow Alaska's lead. Below are answers to frequently asked questions about Alaska's aerial wolf gunning program.

- 1. What is aerial gunning?** Aerial gunning occurs when gunners use airplanes to chase an animal to exhaustion and then shoot it. The use of aircraft to harass or shoot animals from the air was made illegal in 1971 when Congress passed the AHA.
- 2. Why would a state exploit a loophole in the AHA?** Alaska is attempting to suppress predator populations in an attempt to artificially inflate game populations, catering to powerful hunting groups more interested in trophy hunting than the long term health of the ecosystem or the long-term well-being of the game species.
- 3. Is Alaska's program legitimate wildlife management?** No. A legitimate wildlife management program would be based on sound science, supported by the scientific community, conducted by state personnel with proper oversight using an adaptive management approach that includes all the options available, including managing big game harvest allowances. Alaska's program lacks basic scientific information such as regional population censuses for the moose, caribou, wolf and bear populations. Wolf numbers are largely based on anecdotal information from hunters and commercial guides. In addition, for the past 6 years the state has largely relied on private hunters and private pilots to do the shooting not Alaska Department of Fish and Game personnel. These individuals operate with little oversight and are allowed to keep the pelts as trophies or sell them for profit instead of turning them over to wildlife officials.

Another sure sign that the state's actions are not legitimate wildlife management is that aerial "predator control" is occurring in areas already suffering from an overabundance of prey. In March 2009, for example, the state removed 84 wolves from the Upper Yukon/Tanana area. In that same management area the state is also actively engaged in trying to reduce prey populations. They have even taken the rare step of allowing hunters to kill female moose in an effort to reduce numbers and prevent overgrazing leading to winter starvation and the spread of disease among excessive prey.

- 4. What about subsistence hunters?** Subsistence hunters rely on wild game as a primary source of protein. They depend on healthy robust game populations for their survival – a condition enhanced by the presence of a healthy predator population. Unfortunately, the state of Alaska has tried to hijack this traditional lifestyle as an excuse for eliminating the very predators that help maintain healthy robust game populations. At the same time, the state sells permits for moose and caribou to urban and out of state hunters who not only compete directly with rural subsistence hunters but who also compromise the game populations that subsistence hunters rely on by targeting and killing the strongest, healthiest specimen they can find. Aerial gunning is not about protecting subsistence hunters; it is actually for the benefit of urban and out-of-state trophy hunters. It is also important to note that if game populations were legitimately at risk, based on scientific evidence, the PAW Act includes a provision to allow the state to take action to protect the species and ultimately the people who depend on them for subsistence.

- 5. Are wolf and bear populations threatening moose and caribou populations in Alaska?** No. There are more than one million caribou in Alaska in areas as far north as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and as far south as

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the Aleutian Islands. State biologists estimate moose populations to be greater than 160,000. In fact, wolves and bears play an important role in maintaining healthy game populations, as they have done for thousands of years, by culling the weak and sick which, over time, improves the health of the game species. An unscientific predator elimination program is likely to pose a much greater threat to the long term health and survival of game populations than natural predators like wolves and bears. Science has documented that artificially boosting game populations, as the state of Alaska is attempting to do through predator control, could result in habitat destruction by moose and caribou, and ultimately a crash in these populations due to winter starvation.

6. How many wolves and bears have been killed by aerial gunning in Alaska? Each winter, since 2003, the state issues hundreds of permits to aerial gunning teams made up of a hunter and a pilot. They are currently authorized to kill wolves in five areas of the state totaling more than 60,000 square miles – larger than the state of Wisconsin. The state also conducts control using only Alaska Department of Fish and Game staff in an additional area. Since 2003, more than 1,000 wolves have been killed by aerial gunners. Through aerial gunning, as well as ground-based trapping and hunting, the state aimed to remove more than 600 wolves during the winter of 2008-2009 in the five control areas, and aimed to reduce wolf populations by up to 80 percent in some areas. While we do not have specific data on the number of bears that have been killed, same-day airborne hunting of black and brown bears has been approved by the Alaska Board of Game allowing hunters to land and shoot in areas of the state totaling more than 12,000 square miles. Even sows with cubs are targeted now.

7. Does similar aerial gunning occur in other states? Not yet, but the state of Idaho has announced the need to kill wolves in order to boost elk populations in the Clearwater National Forest. Such a plan would likely involve aerial gunning which would be illegal under the PAW Act.

8. What would the Protect America's Wildlife (PAW) Act do? The PAW Act is carefully crafted legislation that would close a loophole in the AHA that Alaska legislators and officials are exploiting; a loophole that could soon be exploited by other states, like Idaho, to artificially inflate prey species, despite the consequences to the broader ecosystems. Specifically, the bill would:

- clarify the conditions in which states can use airplanes and helicopters to kill wolves and other predators (legitimate biological emergency of prey species, for example);
- bar states from using aerial killing to artificially boost game species populations;
- require states to provide a scientific foundation for their use of the wildlife management exception;
- maintain the ability of states to use aerial gunning to protect land, water, wildlife, livestock, domesticated animals, human life or crops.

9. What about the state's right to manage wildlife? The PAW Act acknowledges the right of states to manage wildlife. The act explicitly provides that state wildlife agencies may use planes to proactively respond to legitimate biological emergencies in wildlife populations, including game populations. The act also makes it clear that states can continue to use aircraft for animal control where land, livestock, water, pets, crops, or human health and safety are at risk.

10. Who opposes Alaska's aerial gunning program? Scientific societies, including the American Society of Mammalogists, and hundreds of independent scientists, including those who work or have worked in Alaska, oppose the practice. Many hunters in Alaska oppose the practice because they believe the state's program is scientifically indefensible violates the standard of fair chase. A number of former members of the Alaska Board of Game oppose the practice for the same reasons and have voiced their support for the Protect America's Wildlife Act. Thousands of Alaskans have repeatedly voted to limit aerial gunning, although the most recent ballot initiative failed, due to confusing wording of the measure required by the Lieutenant Governor and a state-financed campaign against the initiative.