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ATTN: Board of Game Comments
Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Boards Support Section
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To Whom It May Concern:

Defenders of Wildlife appreciates the opportunity to submit these written comments on proposals that will be considered at the March, 4th – 10th, 2011 meeting in Wasilla, Alaska.

Established in 1947, Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders) is a non-profit membership based organization dedicated to the protection of all native wild animals and plants in their natural communities. Defenders focuses on the accelerating rate of species extinction and associated loss of biological diversity and habitat alteration and destruction. Defenders also advocates for new approaches to wildlife conservation that will help prevent species from becoming endangered. We have field offices around the country, including in Alaska where we work on issues affecting wolves, black bears, brown bears, wolverines, Cook Inlet beluga whales, sea otters, polar bears and impacts from climate change. Our Alaska program seeks to increase recognition of the importance of, and need for the protection of, entire ecosystems and interconnected habitats while recognizing the role that predators play as indicator species for ecosystem health. Defenders represents more than 3,000 members and supporters in Alaska and more than one million nationwide.

COMMENTS ON THE ALASKA BOARD OF GAME PROPOSALS

Proposal 4. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow a hunter to take one brown bear every two years in Unit 9.

The listed justification for this proposal is that there are an increasing number of bears in Unit 9 and bears are preying excessively on ungulates. Increasing the bag limit is projected to increase the bear harvest, decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

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There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides bear predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, severe winters and wolf predation, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Bear predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent scientific field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects bear predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 9, he should request the BOG to direct the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) to undertake field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of bear predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 5. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would lengthen the alternate year spring and fall brown bear hunting seasons in Unit 9E.

The listed justification for this proposal is that bears in Unit 9E are preying excessively on ungulates. Increasing the bag limit is projected to increase the bear harvest, decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides bear predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, severe winters and wolf predation, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Bear predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent scientific field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects bear predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 9, that he should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of bear predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 6. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would increase the resident hunter bag limit for brown bears to one bear per regulatory year for various subunits in Unit 9.

The listed justification for this proposal is that bears in Unit 9 are preying excessively on ungulates. Increasing the bag limit is projected to increase the bear harvest, decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides bear predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, severe winters and wolf predation, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Bear predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects bear predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 9, that they should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake scientific field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of bear predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 7. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would increase the resident brown bear hunting bag limit to one bear per year in Unit 9E.

The listed justification for this proposal is that bears in Unit 9E are preying excessively on ungulates. Increasing the bag limit is projected to increase the bear harvest, decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides bear predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, severe winters and wolf predation, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Bear predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects bear predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 9, that they should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake scientific field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of bear predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 8. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would open the resident hunting season for caribou in Unit 9D—the Southern Alaska Peninsula Caribou Herd (SAPCH).

This proposal labels the wolf control program whose purpose was to increase the SAPCH for hunters “...one of the great management success stories...” We submit that it is far too soon to label it as a success and far too soon to re-open the hunting season. It will take several more years to determine the outcome of the wolf reduction and the response of the caribou herd. Caribou numbers are still small and it is possible that one severe winter could erase the gains made by reducing wolves. Hunting

should not occur until caribou increase much beyond their current level. Only then can the National Research Council's important recommendation be applied—to properly conduct predator reduction programs so that outcomes are clear. Alaska can't afford the time and cost of another control program with unclear results produced by premature reinstatement of hunting.

Proposal 21. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would establish an intensive management wolf and bear reduction program in Unit 9B.

The listed justification for this proposal is that wolves and bears in Unit 9B are preying excessively on ungulates. Reducing predator numbers is projected to decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, and severe winters, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects that predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 9B, that they should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake scientific field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 22. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would establish an intensive management wolf and bear reduction program in Unit 9E.

The listed justification for this proposal is that wolves and bears in Unit 9E are preying excessively on ungulates. Reducing predator numbers is projected to decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on verifiable field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, and severe winters, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects that predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 9E, that they should request the BOG

to direct the ADF&G to undertake scientific field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 23. We offer the following comments on the Unimak Island wolf control program.

This proposal, if adopted, would amend the wolf control implementation plan for the Unimak Island Caribou Herd.

Currently, comments are being solicited by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on an Environmental Assessment (EA) which addresses the state's proposal to reduce wolves on national wildlife refuge lands (Unimak Island) in order to increase caribou numbers for hunters. Defenders submitted extensive comments on this EA. At this time it is unknown whether the federal determination will or will not allow the State's proposed actions to proceed. If not, Proposal 23 will be moot.

Proposal 25. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would increase the Unit 17 brown bear bag limit for resident and non-resident hunters to two bears per year.

The implied justification for this proposal is that bears in Unit 17 are preying excessively on ungulates. Increasing the bag limit is projected to increase the bear harvest, decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides bear predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, severe winters and wolf predation, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Bear predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects bear predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Unit 17, that they should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake scientific field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of bear predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 26. We *support* this proposal and urge the BOG to adopt it.

This proposal, if adopted, would shorten the brown bear hunting season and reduce the bag limit in Unit 17B, Lake Clark National Preserve.

When ANILCA passed in 1980 and established vast areas of new national preserves, it set the stage for conflicting management approaches. The National Park Service

(NPS) mandates apply to the preserves but hunting is subject to state regulations. At times, state regulations are not in accordance with requirements of federal statutes and regulations governing NPS lands and their management. Such is the case for bear hunting on Lake Clark National Preserve lands.

Proposal 26 details the problem for Lake Clark National Preserve. NPS mandates do not allow activities that reduce the numbers of native species for the purpose of increasing the numbers of harvested species, nor allow others to do so on NPS lands. This has been compromised by state regulations designed to reduce brown bears in order to increase moose. Bear hunting seasons and bag limits were lengthened under the umbrella of intensive management in an attempt to provide more moose for hunters. Recent increases in bear harvests conflict with the NPS objective of providing naturally occurring concentrations of bears. Harvests should be reduced by shortening seasons and reducing bag limits. We urge the BOG to take this step.

Proposals 27 and 28. We *oppose* these proposals and urge the BOG to reject them.

These proposals, if adopted, would establish a predator control implementation plan targeting brown bears in Unit 17B, or change the brown bear bag limit in Unit 17B for purposes of reducing bear numbers and increasing moose.

As with many proposals generated by local residents or Fish and Game Advisory Committees, these proposals contain only anecdotal claims that bear numbers have increased and there is heavy bear predation on moose resulting in fewer moose for hunters. This is used to justify a control program to reduce bears with the expectation that more moose will be available to hunters.

We suggest that any new bear control programs must be based on field studies that validly demonstrate bear predation is limiting moose population growth rather than other factors including heavy hunting, poor habitat, wolf predation or severe winters.

Anecdotal information is insufficient to trigger control programs as was clearly demonstrated in the McGrath area in 2000 and 2001. At McGrath, moose were estimated at 850 animals in 2000, down from several thousand two decades earlier. Locals termed it a crisis and demanded a wolf control program. A population of 3000-3500 moose was deemed necessary to sustain a harvest of 135-150 required for local subsistence needs. However, a moose census in 2001 revealed a moose population of about 3600, more than necessary to provide enough harvested animals per year for local residents. The 2000 moose population estimate (850) was based on poor data obtained during marginal census conditions that resulted in a drastic underestimate of true population size. This is an example of local reliance on anecdotal or poor information that may be used to justify unnecessary and costly predator control programs.

We should not repeat the mistakes made at McGrath when addressing concerns in Unit 17B. There is no substitute or shortcut for valid scientific field studies prior to creating a predator control program so that limiting factors are identified and ranked in order of importance. It has not been proven that predation is a universal limiting factor for moose populations across Alaska. Bear predation alone has seldom been documented as severely reducing moose numbers or holding moose populations at low densities.¹

Proposal 29. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would repeal the requirement that when brown bears are shot in defense of life and property (DLP) in Unit 17, the shooter must salvage the hide and skull and report the kill to the ADF&G.

This proposal labels the salvage and reporting requirements for DLP bears as “cumbersome.” We regard the requirements as essential. Each year, in addition to bears that are shot that truly are DLP bears, brown bears are shot and DLP claims are made when bears are merely in the area but are no threat to humans. The DLP salvage and reporting requirements must be preserved in all Units to minimize the random shooting of bears. Those who shoot bears under a DLP claim must be prepared to skin the bear, save the skull and file a report. Repealing the requirement in one unit would lead to requests to repeal it in all other units and would ultimately result in the shooting of many more bears. The salvage and reporting requirements for DLP bears were adopted by the BOG years ago for sound reasons that are still valid. These requirements should remain as is in all Game Management Units.

Proposal 38. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow the use of radio communications for taking wolves in Unit 17.

We oppose this proposal because it would result in de facto predator control—reducing wolves in hopes of increasing moose for hunters by bypassing the adoption of a predator control program and preparing an implementation plan. Regulations allowing de facto predator control have been adopted by the BOG since passage of the Intensive Management Law in 1994. These have led to vast liberalization of wolf hunting and trapping bag limits and season lengths absent verifiable data showing that such regulation resulted in increased ungulates for hunters, or that wolves were limiting ungulates in the first place. Unfortunately wolves are taken when hides are unprime and worthless, and when young pups are dependent on adults and are likely

¹ W.B. Ballard and V. Van Ballenberghe. 2007. Predator/Prey Relationships. Pp.247-273 in: A.W. Franzmann and C. C. Schwartz (eds.), Ecology and management of the North American moose, second edition. University Press of Colorado, Boulder, CO. 733pp.

to starve without them. Although these problems are not directly related to Proposal 38, it is aimed at de facto control and is therefore part of the same issue.

We also oppose this proposal because it would repeal the long-standing regulation prohibiting radio communications employed in taking big game animals including wolves. With all the legal methods of taking wolves using aircraft to spot them and snowmachines to transport hunters over vast areas, is it really necessary to instantly communicate the location of wolves to hunters on the ground? We think not, especially given that once the regulation is repealed in one unit it would likely spread to other units and to other species. We urge the BOG to preserve what few fair chase standards we have left in Alaska, especially for wolves and bears.

Proposal 40. We *support* this proposal and urge the BOG to adopt it.

This proposal, if adopted, would shorten the brown bear hunting season and reduce the bag limit in Unit 13, including lands adjacent to Denali National Park and Preserve and Wrangell St. Elias National Park and Preserve.

When ANILCA passed in 1980 and established vast areas of new national preserves it set the stage for conflicting management approaches. The NPS mandates apply to the preserves but hunting is subject to state regulations. At times, state regulations are not in accordance with requirements of federal statutes and regulations governing NPS lands and their management. Such is the case for bear hunting on Wrangell St. Elias National Preserve and Denali National Preserve lands bordering Unit 13.

Proposal 40 details the problem for these national preserve lands. NPS mandates do not allow activities that reduce the numbers of native species for the purpose of increasing the numbers of harvested species, nor allow others to do so on NPS lands. This has been compromised by state regulations designed to reduce brown bears in order to increase moose. Bear hunting seasons and bag limits were lengthened under the umbrella of intensive management in an attempt to provide more moose for hunters. Recent increases in bear harvests conflict with the NPS objective of providing naturally occurring concentrations of bears. Harvests should be reduced by shortening seasons and reducing bag limits. We urge the BOG to take this step.

Proposal 41. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow taking of brown bears at bait stations in Unit 13D.

The only justification for this proposal is that brown bears are frequenting bait stations intended for black bears in Unit 13D. This is the case in all areas where both

species occur—brown bears are efficient at locating food sources. Hunters are familiar with this risk must be cautious and selective when approaching baits or deciding which animals to take.

We support the current prohibition on baiting brown bears and oppose repealing it in one or more units which would likely spread quickly to other units. We also suggest that if it were legal to incidentally take brown bears at black bear baiting sites, hunters could deliberately establish bait sites for brown bears under the guise of hunting black bears. There would be an unintended loophole in the regulations that could lead to taking many more brown bears in areas where increased harvests are not supported scientifically.

Proposal 58. We offer the following comments on the Unit 13 intensive management moose population objectives.

This proposal presents the Unit 13 moose population and harvest objectives for review by the BOG, as requested.

We are disappointed that ADF&G presented only the current intensive management objectives for moose in Unit 13 and did not suggest updating and revising the objectives – as they had acknowledged was necessary in the Unit 13 intensive management re-authorization plan. The BOG requested a review of the objectives and it is likely that the possibility of changing the objectives will be discussed at the BOG meeting. We suggest that specific moose population goals should have been part of this proposal so that the public would have opportunity to provide comments for deliberation by the BOG.

Nevertheless, we offer the following background and recommendations to assist the BOG in their review. When the intensive management objectives were adopted, they were based largely on historical trends in the Unit 13 moose population. These indicated a peak population in the early 1960s followed by a decline that bottomed in the mid-1970s. There was then another period of increase that ended in the late 1980s and early 1990s following a series of severe winters. Moose numbers then remained relatively stable though ADF&G claims that numbers again increased in recent years.

Moose numbers at the 1960s peak are unknown but were estimated to exceed 25,000. Numbers at the 1970s bottom of the decline are also unknown but were perhaps near 12,500. Similarly, the number present by 1990 is unknown but was estimated at about 20,000. We stress that these estimates are all crude and not based on aerial censuses.

When setting the intensive management objectives, the BOG relied heavily on these estimates. The result was a unit-wide population objective of 17,600 to 21,900, numbers that at the time were thought to be achievable based on the 1990 population estimate. We suggest that the 1990 population was the last in a series of high moose

populations in Unit 13 that were proven to be unsustainable. Given that fact, we further suggest that the current population objective is too high and should be reduced. If moose numbers are allowed to reach the objective it will likely just set the stage for another decline, a pattern of fluctuations that Unit 13 moose have followed for several decades.

We note that ADF&G and the BOG have relied on similar processes in establishing intensive management objectives for many other ungulate populations based on unsustainable historic highs. A vast amount of literature on ungulate population dynamics over the past 3 decades demonstrates that management objectives should never be equated with maximum numbers.² Maximum productivity occurs at about 60% of maximum population, much below the point where food competition among ungulates becomes severe and extensive habitat damage occurs. Accordingly, if we use the Unit 13 moose population estimates of past peak numbers as indicators of maximum population size (20,000-25,000), managing the population for maximum harvest by hunters and predators would indicate a population objective of 12,000 to 15,000 animals. We submit this range of numbers for consideration by the BOG as it reviews the current intensive management objectives for Unit 13 moose.

Proposal 73. We oppose this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would provide an annual bag limit of 3 black bears in Unit 14A.

This proposal advocates raising the black bear bag limit (and possibly the harvest) with no supporting data on changes in bear numbers or density. The only justification is to provide more hunting opportunity. However, prior to providing more hunting opportunity it must first be shown that this bear population can support potential increases in harvest. Bears in this area are affected by ever increasing loss of habitat and habitat encroachment by humans that exclude bears from areas where they previously thrived.

Proposal 74. We oppose this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow registered big game guides to have up to 10 bear bait stations in Unit 16.

We suggest that registered guides and non-resident hunters should not benefit from the special, overly liberal bear baiting regulations adopted as part of the Unit 16

² V. Van Ballenberghe and W. B. Ballard. 2007. Population Dynamics. Pp. 223-245 in: A.W. Franzman and C.C. Schwartz (eds.), Ecology and management of the North American moose, second edition. University Press of Colorado, Boulder, CO. 733 pp.

predator control program. The state has argued that the extreme measures adopted by the BOG in recent years to accomplish intensive management such as aerial shooting of wolves are not actually hunting but rather are predator control actions not subject to fair chase standards. If so, then the extreme measures adopted in Unit 16 to reduce black bears should also be considered as control actions, not hunting, and therefore not eligible for commercial exploitation by guides.

Proposal 76. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would provide a year-round open hunting season on brown bears in Unit 16.

We regard proposals like this one submitted by a Fish and Game Advisory Committee to be the end result of a process that began in 2003 when the BOG began adopting extreme regulations as part of intensive management bear reduction programs. Prior to 2003, brown bears were considered a valuable resource and managed largely as trophy animals. Sustained yield, long-term conservation and fair chase standards for taking bears were all part of the management philosophy applied to management programs when considering regulation changes.

When the BOG began to adopt extreme measures to reduce both black and brown bear numbers by legalizing actions such as sale of bear parts, same-day shooting, taking of bears with cubs and cubs, bear snaring and helicopter transport of bear hunters—things that never before had been legal—they instigated a shift in attitudes towards brown bears by a certain segment of society. Brown bears have increasingly been regarded by some as predators and threats to human safety rather than as trophy animals worthy of careful management. These attitudes have led to support of hunting regulations designed to get rid of bears rather than those designed to prudently manage them.

Despite the shift in attitude by some, many Alaskans still value brown bears as worthy of conservation and sound management. We encourage the BOG to demonstrate that brown bear conservation based on sound science is still the guiding principle behind the bear hunting regulations. This principle would dictate that year-round hunting of this valuable species is inappropriate. By setting this example, the BOG could inform advisory committees that a much broader view of brown bear conservation and management still applies in Alaska and that brown bears are much too valuable to be considered only as predators that we should severely reduce in numbers wherever they occur.

Proposal 77. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal would provide a number of measures to reduce brown bears in Unit 16 in an attempt to increase moose for hunters.

As with many proposals generated by local residents or Fish and Game Advisory Committees, this proposal is based on anecdotal claims that bear numbers have increased and there is heavy bear predation on moose resulting in fewer moose for hunters. This is then used to request a control program to reduce bears with the expectation that more moose will be available to hunters.

We suggest that any new bear control programs must be based on field studies that validly demonstrate bear predation is limiting moose population growth rather than other factors including heavy hunting, poor habitat, wolf predation or severe winters. Anecdotal information is insufficient to trigger control programs.

We think that the specific measures suggested in this proposal to reduce bear numbers including taking brown bear sows with cubs, taking bears at bait stations, no closed season on bears, and snaring of bears are extreme measures. Some, like snaring of brown bears, have already been rejected by the BOG.

Specifically, we strongly oppose baiting of brown bears during summer, a measure that would be permitted under this proposal. There are many valid reasons for continuing the long-standing prohibition on baiting brown bears including the fact that baiting (feeding) bears habituates them to humans and may lead to more bears injuring or killing people, and to increased property damage.

There is no valid evidence indicating that allowing baiting will ultimately result in more moose for hunters. Indeed, hunters that normally stalk brown bears will likely substitute baiting for stalking with no increase in total hunting pressure or number of hunters and no increase in bears harvested. There is no reason to believe that further liberalization in the form of legalized baiting will work.

Allowing baiting to occur during the summer months encourages hunters to waste hides and meat. Bears shed and replace their hair during summer and hides have no trophy value. Bear meat during summer is of low quality, especially for bears feeding on fish.

Bear baiting during summer may result in bears injuring humans when they encounter bait stations with bears nearby. Hikers, berry pickers, boaters and fisherman using the country during summer are apt to encounter bait stations, many of which are unused by hunters except on weekends. Bait stations without a hunter present with sows and cubs nearby are especially hazardous. Brown bears are known to aggressively defend food sources and may attack humans as a result.

We suggest that summer brown bear baiting is a dangerous practice and we urge the BOG to not allow it.

Proposal 78. We *support* this proposal and urge the BOG to adopt it.

This proposal, if adopted, would remove black and brown bears from the Unit 16 predator control program.

When ANILCA passed in 1980 and established vast areas of new national preserves it set the stage for conflicting management approaches. The NPS mandates apply to the preserves but hunting is subject to state regulations. At times, state regulations are not in accordance with requirements of federal statutes and regulations governing NPS lands and their management. Such is the case for bear hunting on Lake Clark National Preserve lands. Such is the case for bear hunting on Lake Clark National Preserve and Denali National Preserve lands adjacent to Unit 16.

Proposal 78 details the problem for these national preserve lands. NPS mandates do not allow activities that reduce the numbers of native species for the purpose of increasing the numbers of harvested species, nor allow others to do so on NPS lands. This has been compromised by state regulations designed to reduce brown bears in order to increase moose. Bear hunting seasons and bag limits were lengthened under the umbrella of intensive management in an attempt to provide more moose for hunters. Recent increases in bear harvests conflict with the NPS objective of providing naturally occurring concentrations of bears. Harvests should be reduced by shortening seasons and reducing bag limits. We urge the BOG to take this step.

Proposal 83. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow taking bull moose in Unit 14A with spike or fork antlers during October 1-October 15.

The proposed dates of this season occur during the peak of the rut when most cows are bred. Holding a popular hunt during this time would likely disrupt breeding in accessible areas of the unit. There is a long-standing tradition in Alaska of setting fall moose hunting season dates before the peak of the rut, both to avoid disrupting breeding and to avoid bulls with poor quality meat.

The justification for the proposal refers to spike/fork antlered bulls as having “undesirable genetics.” There are no studies demonstrating this, in fact white-tailed deer studies have demonstrated that spike antlers in yearling bucks are not a valid predictor of antler size as the bucks age. Furthermore, moose in Unit 14A are not managed for trophy antler size and hunting pressure prevents most bulls from reaching the age of maximum antler size. It is therefore irrelevant whether to select spike/fork yearlings for hunting in order to produce mature bulls that have trophy antlers.

Proposal 90. We oppose this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would close the antlerless moose hunt in Unit 14A and allow bait stations for hunting brown bears during spring.

There are many valid reasons for continuing the long-standing prohibition on baiting brown bears including the fact that baiting (feeding) bears habituates them to humans and may lead to more bears injuring or killing people and to increased property damage. This is even more likely to result in Unit 14A where every year there is increasing habitat loss and encroachment in areas where bears used to thrive.

There is no valid evidence indicating that allowing baiting will ultimately result in more moose for hunters. Indeed, hunters that normally stalk bears will likely substitute baiting for stalking with no increase in total hunting pressure or number of hunters and no increase in bears harvested. Despite vastly liberalized brown bear regulations over the past 20 years, bear numbers in adjacent Unit 13 have not declined, nor have more moose been taken by hunters as a result of the liberal bear hunting regulations. There is no reason to believe that further liberalization in the form of legalized baiting is appropriate or necessary in Unit 14A.

Proposal 94. We oppose this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would establish a non-resident moose hunt in Unit 16B.

It is far too early to re-instate non-resident moose hunting in Unit 16B. Only small gains in moose numbers are projected by ADF&G for this moose population since the intensive management program was begun 5 years ago, and these gains are questionable given the lack of reliable moose census data. Any additional moose available to hunters should be allocated to residents. It will likely be several more years before non-resident hunting can be proposed given the current rate of increase displayed by moose in this unit.

Proposal 103. We offer the following comments on reauthorization of the Unit 16 Predator Control Program.

Control area. The terms “wolf (or bear) population reduction or population regulation” are used without definition. It would be helpful to know how population reduction and population regulation are defined by ADF&G and how they differ.

Prey population information. Moose numbers in Unit 16B are given very precisely as 3,421-4,392 for fall 2010 extrapolated from surveys conducted in 2004-2008. This gives the very misleading impression that the data are of much higher quality than they are and that population estimates are much more reliable than are possible given the existing data. This problem is shared by most of the predator control

implementation plans—prey population estimates are based on trends or indicators rather than aerial census data. As a result, population estimates are provided that suggest that prey numbers are precisely known when, in fact, actual population size might be much different than indicated.

This and other elements of the implementation plan related to wolf and bear population estimates, as well as changes in other limiting factors including winter severity, habitat quality and hunting/trapping impacts, highlight the need to include a monitoring section in this and all other plans. In order to properly monitor the results of the management actions that are being applied, each plan should include a set of protocols describing the methods to monitor such things as predator and prey numbers. We urge the BOG to require periodic aerial moose censuses, not merely herd composition surveys, to measure significant changes in ungulate populations. Without such censuses it is impossible to determine whether or not predator control is “working.” Similarly, we urge the BOG to require periodic wolf and bear censuses to allow assessment of minimum predator population objectives and to ensure that predator numbers are not lower than stipulated. We regard the lack of monitoring protocols in the predator control implementation plans to be a serious deficiency that should be remedied.

The statement is made that: “... habitat does not appear to be limiting the moose population...and is not expected to limit the moose population at objective levels...” We suggest that available data do not allow such conclusions, nor is it even possible to speculate on what will limit moose numbers if they reach the intensive management population objective.

The Unit 16B moose population recruitment rate is estimated at 8-11% by doubling the observed yearling bull/100 cow ratio. Doubling the observed ratio cannot be used as a percentage to estimate recruitment. We find nothing in the moose population dynamics literature that validates this method of estimating recruitment.

Predator population information. Apparently using the same data, the 2006 estimate of 1,500 to 2,000 black bears in Unit 16 is extrapolated to 2,000 to 2,500 bears in 2007. No explanation is given. In fact, the data are insufficient to accurately estimate black bear numbers and the crude estimate given might deviate considerably from actual numbers.

The current estimated mean moose: wolf ratio is 77:1, well above the 30:1 ratio estimated in the literature to allow wolf predation to stabilize moose numbers. The program objective of reducing wolves to a mean number of 34 in Unit 16B should therefore be revised. There should be no need to reduce the current mean number of wolves, 60, to much lower levels given the present moose: wolf ratio and the reported increase in moose numbers in recent years.

The number of moose estimated to be killed by wolves in winter, 160-553, encompasses a huge range and indicates that the underlying data used to calculate these estimates are unreliable.

Human use information. The intensive management moose population objective for Unit 16B is given as 6,500-7,500. As with other Game Management Units (see our comments on the Unit 13 population objectives) this objective was largely based on historical high estimates that likely were very crudely constructed. They were clearly unsustainable and are now likely unattainable given changes in habitat quality over the past 50 years. We urge the BOG to re-examine the objective for Unit 16B and other units as indicated.

As with other implementation plans adopted by the BOG, there is a minimum wolf population objective provided, in this case 22 wolves in Unit 16B. But, as with other plans, there is no protocol provided to ensure that wolf numbers do not fall below this threshold. Without such protocols, providing the minimum number is meaningless. Properly conducted spring (late March or early April) aerial surveys of wolf numbers are necessary. Trapper reports or those of aerial shooters are often biased—they have a vested interest in inflating numbers so they can continue harvesting. We urge the BOG to insert wolf survey protocols into this and other implementation plans to ensure that a viable wolf population remains following control actions.

Although the original black bear population estimate increased in this revised plan (2,000-2,500 vs. 1,500-2,000), the minimum population objective (600) did not. It was based on a 60% reduction of pre-control bear numbers using 1,500 bears as the base. If the BOG accepts the new estimates as correct despite their potential inaccuracy, we suggest also raising the minimum objective to 800 bears using the new base of 2,000 bears.

Alternatives for predator control. Alternatives to lethal predator control are labeled as ineffective, impractical or uneconomical. A lengthy explanation follows but conceals the fact that the Fortymile Caribou Herd program of sterilizing and transplanting wolves was hailed as a great success by ADF&G at the time. Since then, the BOG has simply been unwilling to seriously consider non-lethal methods preferring instead to adopt extreme lethal measures that are thought to be faster and simpler. We urge the BOG to seriously consider implementing non-lethal predator control methods in this and other units.

Anticipated time frame. This program update proposes increasing the program's duration to 6 years from the customary 5. We oppose this change. Even five years is a long time to conduct highly controversial control programs with little public oversight. We strongly urge the BOG to retain the customary 5 year program duration when renewing and updating this implementation plan.

Proposal 105. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow same-day airborne hunting of black bears at bait stations in all units of Region 4.

Prohibition of same-day airborne hunting of big game animals in Alaska has been in effect for decades with certain exceptions. In recent years, exceptions have been made for hunting bears in predator control areas as a means of severely reducing bear numbers in an attempt to increase ungulates for hunters.

Individuals and fish and game advisory committees noted these exceptions and now wish to extend them over vast areas thus bypassing the public process through which predator control programs are adopted. We urge the BOG to reject proposals like this in an attempt to demonstrate to the public that the few fair chase standards Alaska has left (including prohibition of same-day airborne hunting) are still important and should be preserved.

Proposal 106. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would establish an annual trapping bag limit of 10 black bears for all units of Region 4.

We opposed the re-classification of black bears as furbearers. The re-classification was adopted to allow foot snaring of black bears in predator control areas. Now, proposals like this aim to allow “trapping” over vast areas through the use of guns, bows and arrows, muzzle loaders, or spears in addition to foot snares, thus bypassing the public BOG process through which predator control programs are formally adopted. A bag limit of 10 bears is excessive and may result in local over-harvest of bears.

Proposal 107. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would change the regulations requiring guides to accompany hunters at black bear bait stations.

We endorse the present regulations requiring guides to accompany hunters at black bear bait stations.

Proposal 108. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would establish a regional black bear hunting bag limit in Region 4.

We endorse the current regulations that provide for bag limits unit by unit. Requiring unit by unit bag limits is the only way to ensure compliance with reporting requirements and to prudently manage big game populations so as to avoid over-harvesting. Adopting a regional bag limit is very unwise and would likely lead to abuse of the bag limit regulations. Enforcement of a region-wide bag limit in the field would be nearly impossible.

Proposal 109. We *support* this proposal and urge the BOG to adopt it.

This proposal, if adopted, would restore the brown bear hunting tag fee on lands in and near national preserve lands in Units 11, 13, and 16B.

When ANILCA passed in 1980 and established vast areas of new national preserves it set the stage for conflicting management approaches. NPS mandates apply to the preserves but hunting is subject to state regulations. At times, state regulations are not in accordance with requirements of federal statutes and regulations governing NPS lands and their management. Such is the case for bear hunting on Wrangell St. Elias National Preserve and Denali National Preserve lands adjacent to Unit 16.

Proposal 109 details the problem for these national preserve lands. NPS mandates do not allow activities that reduce the numbers of native species for the purpose of increasing the numbers of harvested species, nor allow others to do so on NPS lands. This has been compromised by state regulations designed to reduce brown bears in order to increase moose. Bear hunting seasons and bag limits were lengthened under the umbrella of intensive management in an attempt to provide more moose for hunters. Recent increases in bear harvests conflict with the NPS objective of providing naturally occurring concentrations of bears. Harvests should be reduced by shortening seasons and reducing bag limits. We urge the BOG to take this step.

Proposal 110. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal would reauthorize the brown bear tag fee exemption in various units of Region 4.

Please note our comments on proposal 109. We oppose continuing the tag fee exemption on and near national preserve lands in Units 11, 13 and 16B.

Proposal 119. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would create a new predator control program in the range of the Mulchatna Caribou Herd.

Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides predation such as

poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, and severe winters, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent scientific field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects predation is limiting the Mulchatna Caribou Herd, he should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 120. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would raise the intensive management population objective for the Mulchatna Caribou Herd to 100,000-150,000.

Arbitrarily raising the population objective of this herd will not accomplish the sponsor's apparent wish of increasing caribou numbers as outlined in this proposal. We regard the setting of intensive management population objectives to be important and worthy of careful evaluation. In the absence of compelling data establishing that the available habitat can support more animals and that the proposed new population objective is sustainable, we strongly oppose increasing the objective.

Proposal 121. We *oppose* this proposal and urge the BOG to reject it.

This proposal, if adopted, would allow aerial shooting of wolves in Units 9B and 17.

The listed justification for this proposal is that wolves in Units 9B and 17 are preying excessively on ungulates. Aerial shooting is projected to increase the wolf harvest, decrease predation on moose and caribou and increase the harvest of ungulates by hunters.

There is no evidence or data presented to substantiate any of these claims. Predator control programs must be based on valid field data identifying limiting factors for ungulate populations that include other variables besides wolf predation such as poor habitat, heavy hunting and poaching, severe winters and bear predation, all of which have been shown to contribute to limiting ungulate populations in other areas. Wolf predation may or may not be an important limiting factor too, but there is no way of knowing absent field studies. We suggest that if the sponsor of this proposal suspects wolf predation is limiting ungulate numbers in Units 9B and 17, he should request the BOG to direct the ADF&G to undertake field studies to evaluate the nature and extent of wolf predation in relation to other limiting factors.

Proposal 231. We *support* this proposal and urge the board to adopt it.

This proposal, if adopted, would authorize an antlerless moose hunt in Unit 13.

One of the pitfalls of intensive management is that if it is successful, ungulates may increase to the point where density-dependent feedbacks reduce reproduction and survival and indicators of herd health such as body growth of young and fat reserves of adults decline. At high density, ungulates often overbrowse forage plants, at times enough to cause plant mortality. Eventually, a population decline occurs often as a result of severe winter conditions. There are several well-documented case histories in Alaska that followed this scenario in the past including Unit 13 where a high density of moose (and caribou) in the 1960s declined greatly by the mid-1970s.

Accordingly, managers must monitor moose numbers carefully to prevent the problems that accompany high moose densities. We note that managers often fail to grasp the concept that too many moose might result from intense predator control. A vast literature on ungulate population dynamics over the past 3 decades has demonstrated that management objectives should never be equated with maximum numbers. Maximum productivity occurs at about 60% of maximum numbers, much below the point where food competition among ungulates becomes severe and extensive habitat damage occurs. Accordingly, if we use the Unit 13 moose population estimates of past peak numbers as indicators of maximum population size (20,000-25,000 during peaks in the 1960s and late 1980s), managing the population for maximum harvest by hunters and predators would indicate a population objective of 12,000 to 15,000 animals at present. This is well below the intensive management objective currently in the regulations.

We submit that it would be a mistake to increase moose in Unit 13 to estimated numbers (20,000-25,000) that occurred during past peaks as these had a demonstrated history of being unsustainable—population declines inevitably resulted from high moose density. The only way to effectively stabilize an increasing moose population (or to reduce it) is to harvest cows. Harvesting bulls only cannot stop population growth as cows comprise more than half of the total population.

We encourage the board to recognize that moose numbers in Unit 13 should not be allowed to increase to high density and that implementing cow hunts now is the prudent way to begin managing them to prevent this from occurring. We further suggest that the intensive management population objectives for Unit 13 should be lowered (see our comments on Proposal 58). Because Unit 13 is such an important hunting area for Alaskans and because it has a history of being carefully managed, it can serve as a model for other units if intensive management is successful there. But it will be a poor model if cow hunts are delayed and moose increase beyond sustainable limits.

**Board of Game Wolf Population Control and Management Policy
#2011-XXX-BOG**

We **oppose** the majority of changes made to the Board of Game's Wolf Population Control and Management Policy (wolf policy), but **support** developing alternative methods to aerial control.

The wolf policy has received some cosmetic modifications and extensive simplification from the version presented in the October 2010 BOG proposal handbook; the overall result is an even more inferior document. Softening the policy's title by eliminating the word [control], adding some conciliatory language relating to the importance of wolves to all Alaskans, and attempting to differentiate between management and control does not change the purpose of the policy – which is to provide guidance on how the BOG will suppress wolf populations. Passage of this stripped down policy will lead to a more arbitrary decision-making process.

As outlined in our comments on the October 2010 version of the wolf policy this continues the trend of a decreasing reliance on vital scientific information to justify Alaska's highly controversial wolf control programs (see Defenders' comments on Board of Game Wolf Population Control and Management Policy #82-31-GB included in the October BOG meeting handbook). The revised wolf policy omits all language referring to factors other than predation that may limit ungulate populations and fails to link the reduction of wolves with sought- after increases in ungulate populations for the benefit of human harvest.

Defenders continues to maintain that ADF&G has not collected sufficient data or conducted sufficient studies to determine conclusively that their predator control programs are responsible for increases in ungulate populations. Nor has the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) presented sufficient data to demonstrate that a statistically significant increase in prey populations has occurred. The revised wolf policy does not address these issues and fails to tackle significant weaknesses in Alaska's controversial predator control programs.

Background and Purpose

The new version of the wolf policy includes the statement that “In some other areas, including national park lands, the Board also recognizes that non-consumptive uses of wolves may be considered a priority use. With proper management, non-consumptive and consumptive uses are in most cases compatible but the Board may occasionally have to restrict consumptive uses where conflicts among uses are frequent.”

We welcome the recognition by the BOG that where conflicts arise between consumptive and non-consumptive users that consumptive uses may need to be restricted. However, we urge the BOG to further recognize that the state of Alaska's wolf control policy also often conflicts with the mission and policies of federal agencies who are mandated under federal law to manage their lands for natural diversity and natural conditions rather than the maximization of hunting opportunity. The BOG should amend the wolf policy to expressly exclude federal lands from regulations aimed specifically at decreasing natural predator populations in order to allow federal agency managers to meet their mandates.

Wolf/Human Use Conflicts

As stated in our previous comments, the first overt change to the wolf policy occurs under the section on wolf and human use conflicts. This section states that conflict arises when human uses of prey animals cannot be reasonably satisfied; eliminated is the final portion of the sentence which stated [because of predation by wolves]. We agree that conflict between humans and wolves arises when humans perceive scarcity or when hunter satisfaction is reduced, and we feel it is significant that this language is omitted. In fact, this omission provides further evidence for the widespread conviction that the ADF&G's predator control programs are often driven more by human perception than biological need.

Wolf Management and Wolf Control

In the wolf management and control section of the newly amended policy, the BOG attempts to differentiate between *management* and *control* (emphasis added). In the newly added section the BOG defines wolf management as "managing seasons and bag limits to provide for general public hunting and trapping opportunities." However, this section immediately follows with a statement that "management" helps aid in "mitigating conflicts between wolves and humans or improving ungulate harvest levels." Thus, the BOG has succeeded in blurring the lines between what they define as control and what they define as management in the very same section that attempts to differentiate the two.

The section goes on to state that "hunters are satisfied with taking wolves during off-prime seasons and thus opportunity for harvest may be allowed." While it may be true that hunters are "satisfied" with unprime furs, this satisfaction ultimately stems from some hunters' desire to suppress wolf numbers in favor of increasing ungulates; indeed this is the main rationale identified in proposals to expand seasons into times when furs are unprime. Referring to this type of control as "management" is disingenuous as it fails to address the fact that seasons are often extended into the portion of the year when females are pregnant and denning. Further, unlike the "planned or systematic" way in which wolf "control" is supposedly implemented, when the BOG extends the season in the name of

“management” it routinely does so by relying on anecdotal evidence that wolves are suppressing ungulate populations. Scientific studies backing these assumptions are seldom provided.

Overall, the BOG has failed in its attempt to distinguish a difference between control and management – other than demonstrating that “management” circumvents the public process of implementing wolf control and diminishes the need for scientific evidence to justify control efforts. The BOG cannot dispute that other furbearers are not “managed” in the manner outlined in this policy; allowing the harvest of a furbearing animal during reproductive seasons and when their pelts have little value is not sound wildlife management policy.

The approved and revised policies both indicate that wolf control means “the regulation of wolf numbers to achieve a temporarily lowered wolf population” and that “wolf populations are generally allowed to increase to or above pre-control levels once prey populations increase.” Unfortunately, as we stated in our comments on the October version of this policy, evidence from Alaska’s predator control programs clearly demonstrates the fallacy of this statement. Rather, history of Alaska’s wolf control programs shows that wolf populations will continue to be substantially suppressed over large areas of the state for extended periods of time.

One example of this is provided by the predator control plan for Game Management Unit (GMU) 13 which was readopted with little debate during the October, 2010 BOG meeting. In GMU 13, the wolf population has already been reduced to 1/3 its pre-control level for a period of 6 years. By re-adopting the plan, the BOG ensured that the population will continue to be suppressed to this level for an additional 6 years. The wolf policy, therefore, continues to lead readers to believe that this is a temporary solution when in reality these programs may very well be perpetual.

In our prior comments on this policy we criticized the BOG for stating that “over thirty years of intensive wolf and moose management and research has provided a great deal of information on what biologists can expect from intensive management programs” (see Defenders’ comments on Board of Game Wolf Population Control and Management Policy #82-31-GB included in the October BOG meeting handbook).

The extensive revision of this section expounds upon the level of information now known about the success of predator control. While we appreciate the BOG’s effort to clarify the development of knowledge regarding the effects of predator control from that presented in the October 2010 draft, the new inclusion is misleading, leave the false impression that much has been learned over the last 13 years that was not known when the National Research Council (NRC) conducted their review. In fact, the ADF&G has not significantly improved the design of

their predator management programs since the NRC published its report. Thus, we continue to question the claim that a good deal has been learned. Specific recommendations that would allow the BOG and ADF&G to make such claims have been largely ignored including:

1. Management actions should be planned as experiments so it is possible to assess their outcome. Control actions should be designed to include clearly specified monitoring protocols of sufficient duration to determine whether or not predictions are borne out and why.
2. Managers should avoid actions with un-interpretable outcomes or low probability of achieving stated goals.
3. The status of predator and prey populations should be evaluated before predator reduction efforts occur.
4. Better data on habitat quality should be collected and carrying capacity of the prey's habitat should be evaluated.
5. Changes in the population growth rate of prey and in hunter satisfaction should be monitored.
6. The scope of studies of predators and prey should be broadened and better data on bear ecology should be collected.
7. Development of long-term data sets should continue and better data on long-term consequences of control should be collected.
8. Decision makers should be more conservative in setting hunting regulations and designing control efforts (NRC 2007:10-13).

Decision to Undertake Wolf Control

The previously approved wolf policy had admittedly weak language regarding the importance of monitoring, stating that [surveys *should* be made at least once a year in control areas to provide estimates of population sizes, productivity, mortality factors, and distribution or the respective populations] (emphasis added).” However, the revised wolf policy eliminates this language altogether and states that surveys should be conducted as frequently as necessary to ensure that adequate data are available to make management decisions and to ensure that wolf numbers remain sufficient to maintain long-term sustained yield harvests.

The omission of what types of data should be collected as well as the provision of increased latitude concerning the requirements for when surveys should be conducted is of great concern to those who have long advocated that increased rigor be applied to Alaska's predator control programs. Further, as we stated in our previous comments, the addition of sustained yield language does not alter the reality that wolf populations in wolf control areas have already been drastically reduced. Sustained yield can occur at a number of different population levels and, as long as a population does not continue to decline after objectives are met, one could claim that the provision for sustained yield is being met.

ADF&G often asserts that wolves are resilient to over-harvest. However, any population of any species that has undergone dramatic reductions is more susceptible to stochastic demographic, genetic, or environmental events and is thus more vulnerable over the long term. While it may satisfy a judge with no biological education or experience, adding a clause alluding to sustained yield does not ensure that the goals of long-term viability for wolf populations will be met. Further, managing wolves solely for “sustained yield” ignores the keystone role wolves play in Alaska’s ecosystem including natural regulation of ungulate populations and maintenance of herd health.

Another change to the wolf policy from that of the October version was the complete elimination of the bulleted list outlining when the BOG would decide to undertake wolf control. The paragraph provided in its place generalizes and simplifies the conditions under which wolf control will be considered. Again, simplification of the policy will lead to a less rigorous decision-making process; we urge the board to strengthen rather than weaken the policy standards for implementing wolf control.

Methods the Board will Consider When Implementing Wolf Control Programs

1. Expanding public hunting and trapping into seasons when wolf hides are not prime.

As stated previously, the BOG directly contradicted itself by claiming that expanded hunting seasons are considered “management” and not “control.” Listing the expansion of seasons under wolf control further clarifies this contradiction.

2. Use of baiting for hunting wolves

We generally oppose this method of hunting wolves as it does not adhere to the principles of fair chase, encourages the habituation of wolves to human foods and poses a public safety risk. We especially oppose allowing this method of trapping under general trapping regulations.

3. Allowing land and shoot by the public.
4. Allowing aerial shooting by the public.

Aerial shooting of wolves was referred to in the October version of the policy as: [The Commissioner of Fish and Game may delegate authority to department

personnel or agents of the state to shoot wolves from airplanes or helicopters as part of wolf population control programs. Taking wolves under delegation of authority from the Commissioner is not considered hunting and permits will not be issued to nonresidents.]

We are concerned that the new policy eliminates the language regarding the Commissioner being responsible for delegating this authority. Are we to assume that the BOG will now be responsible for permitting citizens? If so, we oppose this change, if not, who will be responsible? We are also concerned that reference to non-residents being ineligible to participate in these programs is eliminated. Under no circumstances should non-residents be allowed to participate in control programs and we find that there is no need to eliminate reference to non-residents in this policy. We do not support the expansion of means to take wolves through aerial gunning programs – especially by private citizens. If aerial control is biologically justified, it should only be conducted by expertly trained personnel and not by privately permitted citizens.

5. Encouraging the Department to hire or contract with wolf trappers and other agents who may use one or more of the methods listed here.

While Defenders opposes management of game species to maximize production, methods alternative to aerial gunning should be explored and we **support** this aspect of the revised wolf policy. However, any liberalization of trapping or hunting of wolves must be both biologically defensible and socially acceptable. As Defenders has advocated in previous comments and proposals, programs must demonstrate that ungulate populations are suppressed, that a biological emergency exists and that predators are the primary cause for declines. Further, programs must demonstrate a reasonable expectation that reduction in predators will result in an increase in ungulates; include standardized and peer reviewed protocols for determining wolf populations in order to insure the continued viability of the population; include habitat and disease assessments in order to determine other potential causes for declines; and, ensure herds remain below carrying capacity in order to prevent ecological degradation. In addition, all trapping programs must be conducted during seasons when females are not denning and where pelts are prime in order to avoid waste of a valuable wildlife resource.

In addition to exploring alternative lethal methods for taking wolves, we encourage the BOG to consider alternative methods of reducing predation including sterilization of wolves and protection of calving females. Such methods have been proven effective in other areas. Again, methods of reducing predation should only be used when predation is the primary limiting factor and where habitat evaluations have demonstrated that the herd is well below carrying capacity. Such methods should not be used to maintain herds at or near carrying capacity.

Terminating Wolf Control

We appreciate the addition of language regarding the termination of wolf control. However, the inclusion is far too general to provide real guidance on the duration of wolf control programs. This portion of the policy should be augmented in order to provide guidance on when programs will be terminated.

Board of Game Bear Conservation, Harvest, and Management Policy #2011-XXX-BOG

We continue to **oppose** the adoption of the revised Bear Conservation, Harvest, and Management Policy (bear policy). Despite revisions from that were presented in the October proposal book, the proposed bear policy remains primarily focused on bears as predatory species in need of reduction through a wide variety of means. It fails to prioritize conservation and ethical treatment of bears in Alaska. The proposed bear policy broadly expands the power of the Board of Game (BOG) to develop regulations on management of both black and brown bears in absence of biological justification and through the use of highly controversial harvest practices.

Specifically we **oppose** the following changes outlined in the bear policy:

1. the extensive changes to the bear policy's *Guiding Principles* which virtually eliminate all language referring to the conservation of bears in Alaska;
2. the elimination of language regarding the importance of monitoring bear harvest and population size;
3. the elimination of language regarding effectiveness of bear control in reducing predation on ungulates including the *Board Consideration* section of the policy which outlined under what scenarios bear control could be considered;
4. the elimination of the restriction that liberalized means of harvest be instituted solely for the purposes of bear control as well as the expansion of controversial methods and means of bear harvest.

Background

Wildlife Viewing

We appreciate the BOG amending the bear policy from that presented in the October proposal handbook to reflect the importance of bear viewing in the state. However, the revised bear policy continues to exclude language regarding maximization of public benefits and the need to pursue management programs designed to provide wildlife viewing opportunities.

Brown and grizzly bears

The new bear policy continues to provide an interesting discussion of the resilience of brown bears to the effects of over-harvest and predator control campaigns. Even more interesting is the utilization of Kenai Peninsula brown bears as an example of how past conservation concerns dissipated with new information. The language utilized in this section implies that the “stakeholder process” resulted in the determination that the bear population on the Kenai remained stable despite initial concern. However, the attempt to conflate the stakeholder process with this determination is a clear mis-representation as the process did not make this determination, nor was it meant to. Rather, the stakeholder group developed a report titled “*A Conservation Assessment of the Kenai Peninsula Brown Bear*” which summarizes the current knowledge of population trends and conservation threats.

The main conclusion presented by the report was that significant knowledge gaps exist which are critical for effective management of the population. In fact, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) continues to be concerned over the Kenai’s brown bear population because the harvest has been liberalized substantially since 2007 and large numbers of animals continue to be taken annually in defense of life and property, including a high of 42 animals in 2008 alone. Due to this ongoing concern, the FWS recently initiated a study to determine the population size of Kenai brown bears – a study to which ADF&G was opposed. If so few examples exist to demonstrate the resiliency of brown bears to high levels of harvest then further research is clearly needed before implementing management measures that could affect brown bear conservation.

Guiding Principles

Unlike the guiding principles established in the 2006 bear policy the new *Guiding Principles* are aimed almost exclusively at the management of bears as predators and implementing strategies to reduce their populations rather than the conserve the species in Alaska.

We **oppose** changes to the *Guiding Principles* which eliminate:

1. language referring to the need to work with enforcement agencies to identify enforcement priorities and to assist with and encourage adequate enforcement activities;
2. language regarding protecting genetic diversity of bears;
3. language regarding the need to consider the short-term and long-term effects of habitat loss and fragmentation on bear populations.

If the BOG intends to allow extreme methods to promote the increased take of bears including baiting, unlimited harvesting, selling of bear parts, taking of sows and cubs, and aerial control as is outlined in this policy it must ensure that harvest is strictly controlled, effectively enforced and monitored. Eliminating the need to work with enforcement agencies to ensure adequate enforcement is therefore unacceptable. The bear policy language should be amended in order to institutionalize partnerships between enforcement and management agencies.

Overall, the elimination of conservation related language from the *Guiding Principles* calls into question the BOG's intentions concerning the long-term viability of bears in Alaska and reinforces the view that the BOG has little concern for the overall health of bear populations. It is not enough to state that bear populations will be "managed on a sustained yield basis." Rather, the bear policy must include language on how this will be achieved. We recommend that the *Guiding Principles* section be amended to include the formerly eliminated language on genetic diversity and effects of habitat loss and fragmentation.

While we continue to oppose the majority of changes made to the *Guiding Principles* section, we **support** the BOG in promoting regulations that encourage the human use of bear meat as food as outlined in *Guiding Principle* number 5 of this latest revision to the bear policy. By acknowledging and promoting the value of bears as an important food source, the BOG can help increase respect for and understanding of the importance of maintaining healthy bear populations. The utilization of bears as food sources can also decrease pressure on ungulate populations, allowing people to concentrate harvest efforts on species that are abundant rather than focus on predation by bears on "preferred" game species.

Conservation and Management Policy

In general the conservation and management portion of the bear policy continues to focus excessively on predation by bears as a negative aspect of their biology rather than as an integral component of the ecosystem. We urge the BOG to increase the focus on conservation of bears and to promote acceptance of natural bear predation among the public.

Monitoring Harvest and Population Size

The revised bear policy states that in some areas monitoring bear numbers and harvests is of lower priority than regions where trophy quality is important. While we agree that it is important to alleviate the difficulty of sealing bears for subsistence harvesters in remote areas, this does not mean that adequate data should not be collected for these harvested populations. Indeed, failure to monitor bear populations in remote regions may result in over-exploitation. This is especially true of brown bear populations which are more vulnerable to overharvest. Though

the bear policy states that community harvest surveys may be used to gain knowledge about the level of harvest over time, these surveys are sorely lacking in most regions of the state – especially in areas where monitoring is of low priority. Further, even where sealing is required, harvest of black bears especially remains sorely underreported. The revised bear policy must therefore maintain the need to adequately monitor all harvested wildlife populations to ensure population viability.

Managing Predation by Bears

The revised bear policy states that the “Board and the Department may also need to reduce bear predation on ungulates to provide for continued sustained yield management or conservation of ungulates.” Since the BOG has recognized the need to promote the use of bears as a food species, we urge the BOG to consider that managing bears as a food source can reduce the harvest pressure on certain ungulate species. By focusing harvest on bears where they are abundant rather than moose, which are supposedly depleted, the BOG may be able to decrease the need to reduce bear predation strictly to protect ungulate species.

Expansion of Controversial Methods

We **oppose** methods of take that would allow:

1. trapping using foot-snares, for black bears under bear management programs or predator control programs;
2. incidental take of grizzly bears during black bear trapping programs;
3. taking of sows accompanied by cubs and the cubs;
4. Aerial shooting of bears by department staff in moose and caribou calving areas.

In the bear policy approved in 2006, the BOG’s stated intent was that the predation management section of the bear policy only be directed at specific target areas and was not intended for implementation under general hunting regulations. However, the revised bear policy eliminates the stipulation that bear snaring is not meant for general hunting purposes, expands the use of bear snaring to include general bear management and eliminates reference to limit snaring to populations targeted for reduction. Policies such as the revised bear management policy – which conflate predator control with predator management – confuse the public’s understanding of wildlife management in general and decrease the public’s approval of all wildlife management practices.

The latest version of the revised bear policy also includes aerial shooting of bears as an additional method that may be considered for managing predation by bears. We **adamantly oppose** this method of controlling bear populations. Defenders has long

opposed the state of Alaska's aerial wolf control programs for its lack of scientific justification, the focus on maximizing ungulate populations without regard to the ecosystem effects, the inhumane and controversial nature of shooting wildlife from airplanes and the difficulty of enforcing violations of the Airborne Hunting Act. For these same reasons, we oppose the use of airborne shooting for controlling bear populations in Alaska and urge the BOG to eliminate consideration of this new method from the policy.

We also **continue to oppose**:

1. Baiting of black bears
2. Baiting of grizzly bears
3. Same day airborne taking of bears

As we have stated in numerous comments to the BOG, bear baiting is a highly contentious issue in Alaska and does not meet the principles of fair chase. Allowing the same-day airborne taking of bears invites abuse of the Airborne Hunting Act. Defenders of Wildlife does not oppose wildlife harvest methods that are biologically justified and adhere to principles of sound wildlife management and fair chase. However, we will continue to oppose practices that do not adhere to these principles.

Efficacy of Bear Control to Increase Ungulates

We **oppose** changes to the new bear policy which eliminates the need for:

- a. bear predation to be determined as an important factor in the decline of a prey population or preventing recovery of a low density prey population;
- b. bear predation being shown to be an important factor preventing attainment of approved prey population of human-use objectives;
- c. efforts to control bear predation to be reasonably expected to achieve improvement in sustainable human use of ungulates.

The revised bear policy calls for the wide application of liberalized harvest methods such as snaring of black bears to reduce black bear populations and increase ungulates for human harvest. However, an increase in black bear harvest through snaring will not necessarily result in a substantial reduction of bear populations, nor is there any guarantee that moose population or harvest will increase as a result of these controversial programs. Field studies demonstrating that black bear predation is strongly limiting ungulate populations are lacking, as is data demonstrating that reduction in predation by black bears leads to an increase in moose numbers.

Overall, this revised bear policy does nothing to increase the scientific credibility of Alaska's programs or its bear management policies. In the 2006 version of the bear policy, the *Research Strategies* section stated that the department may conduct research to quantify the contributions of each bear species to the causes of declines in ungulate populations and that monitoring activities designed to determine the effects of high levels of bear harvest on recovery of depressed ungulate populations would help focus management efforts. However, any reference to the efficacy of management programs is conspicuously absent from the new bear policy. In order to increase the credibility of ADF&G's management policies, effectiveness must be thoroughly analyzed through field studies. Language regarding the need for this type of study must be reintroduced into the revised bear policy. The bear policy must also be amended to include the list of considerations the BOG must make prior to instituting any predator control plans.

CONCLUSION

The proposed revised bear policy broadly expands the power of the Board of Game (BOG) to develop regulations on management of both black and brown bears in absence of biological justification and expands the use of highly controversial harvest practices. The types of liberalized harvest methods this bear policy promotes should be developed only under a formal predator control planning process initiated by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) and subject to public review and comment. The Alaskan public and Alaska's wildlife deserve a bear policy that is based on sound conservation and wildlife management principles.

*Note – as in the proposal handbook, underlined language in this section indicate additions that have been made by those who developed the revised wolf policy, while bracketed language indicates [deletions].

Sincerely,

Theresa Fiorino
Alaska Representative
Defenders of Wildlife