

**Findings of the Board of Game and
Guidelines for a Unit 19D East Predation Control Program**
March 12, 2003

I. Overview Of Project Development And Actions Taken to Date

- A. History of Public Process: The Board of Game has a long history of considering issues related to increasing the harvest level of moose in Unit 19D East to improve the well being of people who depend heavily on moose for food. In addition, the Adaptive Wildlife Management Team conducted a public process. Some of the key activities in this process have been:
1. March 1995: Under the state's Intensive Management statute (AS16.05.255(e)-(g)), the Board determined that human consumptive use is the preferred use of moose in Unit 19D East (5AAC 92.108).
 2. Fall 1995: The Board established a wolf predation control area in Unit 19D East and authorized the Commissioner to reduce wolf numbers during 1996-2001 (5AAC 92.15(1)).
 3. January 2000: The Board made a finding of emergency regarding the Unit 19D East situation and updated the wolf control implementation plan and extended the Commissioner's authority to reduce wolves for 2000-2005.
 4. February 2001: The Adaptive Wildlife Management Team (AWMT) released its report that included recommendations to proceed with actions to control predation by both wolves and black bears in a portion of Unit 19D East in the McGrath area called an Experimental Micro Management Area (EMMA).
 5. March 2001: The Board of Game supported the AWMT report (Resolution 2001-135 BOG) and among other recommendations, urged the Department "begin predator control as soon as possible."
 6. May 2001: The Board of Game adopted several regulations to begin implementing the recommendations of the AWMT (see list of actions taken under I. D. below).
 7. October 2001: The AWMT reaffirmed their recommendations for control of predation by both wolves and black bears in the EMMA, provided more specific recommendations on wolf and black bear predation control methodology, and also recommended further public review and comment on the project.
 8. February 2003: The Board of Game announced its intentions to reactivate development of an action plan for Unit 19D East, incorporating new research data, and inviting public review and comment.
- B. National Academy of Sciences Report: Development of the Unit 19D East research and management program as well as the AWMT report and recommendations included consideration of the findings of the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council report titled "Wolves, Bears, and Their Prey in Alaska."

- C. Research Program: Two years of intensive research in Unit 19D East began in March 2001 focusing on:
1. Moose and wolf population numbers;
 2. Mortality of calves and adult moose;
 3. Winter moose habitat quality, quantity and availability;
 4. Condition of moose; and
 5. Movement patterns of moose in the area.
- D. Management Actions Already Taken
1. The Department conducted wolf trapping and bear baiting clinics in McGrath and associated villages to encourage local residents to increase harvests of wolves and bears.
 2. The Board of Game:
 - a. Liberalized bear baiting regulations to include both spring and fall seasons in Unit 19D East.
 - b. Reduced the length of moose hunting seasons.
 - c. Closed the winter moose season.
 - d. Established a registration permit hunt to help reduce harvest and better track harvest levels.
 - e. Expanded the Upper Kuskokwim Controlled Use Area to prohibit use of aircraft for hunting moose in a large portion of Unit 19D East.
 - f. Excluded non-resident hunters from moose hunting in Unit 19D East.
 - g. Reduced Intensive Management moose population and harvest objectives to be more achievable.
 - h. Authorized use of snowmachines to take wolves in Unit 19.
- E. Additional Hunting Restrictions To Be Applied During Predator Control: Local residents agreed that hunting in the EMMA will be closed during predation control activities are conducted by the Department.

II. Findings of the Board of Game

- A. Research conducted by the Division of Wildlife Conservation has given the Board a much clearer picture of moose population dynamics and interactions with predators in the McGrath area. Current information is sufficient to make management decisions. On-going research will contribute to the scientific knowledge base, consideration of adaptations that may be needed as the program proceeds, and the applicability of the EMMA approach to other similar situations.
- B. Data from the on-going research program in Unit 19D East demonstrates that wolves prey on moose year round, and in addition, predation from black bears and grizzly bears is a major source of mortality to moose calves.
- C. Local residents and many other Alaskans are very frustrated about the lack of action to implement a control program. This lack of action has occurred despite the longstanding approval and repeated affirmation of the Board of Game to use predation control to attain harvest management objectives.
- D. Local residents have already demonstrated a willingness to compromise on issues related to rebuilding the moose population in McGrath by agreeing to reductions on hunting.
- E. Registered guides have indicated support for predator management activities, even though they recognize that opportunities to guide non-resident moose hunters do not currently exist in the area and may not for some time.
- F. The Board is obligated to follow the Intensive Management Statute requirements of managing the moose population for high levels of human consumptive uses, even though intense opposition to predator control is voiced from some segments of the public.

III. Board of Game Recommendations

- A. The current Board of Game concurs and reaffirms the findings of previous boards that human consumptive use is the preferred use of moose in Unit 19D (95-86-BOG, Resolution 2001-135 BOG) and that predation control in the McGrath area is necessary to help restore the abundance of the moose population to provide for human harvest. This includes control of predation by wolves, black bears, and grizzly bears. Predation control activities should be conducted as quickly and effectively as possible.
- B. The Board recognizes local concerns and endorses an experimental predator management program in Unit 19D East.
- C. The Board recognizes that the current Unit 19D East Intensive Management population objective (3,000 to 3,500 moose) and harvest objective (130 to 150 moose) recommended by AWMT are conservative. The previous population objective was 6,000-8,000 moose, and the previous harvest objective was 300-400 moose. The Board requests the Department to re-examine these numbers. If appropriate, the Board will revise the objectives at a later meeting.

- D. The Board recognizes that the EMMA concept of controlling predation in a small area near rural communities is a substantial departure from previous predation control programs that applied to larger geographical areas. As such, it is an experimental approach. If successful, this approach may lead to developing methods that can be used to better focus future predation management activities and increase the capacity for local, more self-reliant programs. For this approach to be effective, there must be adequate means available for local residents and others to effectively regulate predator numbers following Department conducted control programs.
- E. The Board recommends continued use of the adaptive management process as the Unit 19D East predation control program proceeds, and as research and management results provide additional information. The Board will work with the Department to consider changes in the program as future need arises.
- F. The Board recommends the Department proactively provide public information on predator/prey dynamics and the effort to rebuild the moose population in the McGrath area on a statewide and national basis. The Department should also make the effort to reach out to rural Alaska residents through mail and other techniques, to supplement the current web site information.
- G. In consideration of the amount of time, effort, and public process expended by the Department and Board of Game over the last decade, it is essential that the predation control project move forward now. If the project does not receive approval to move forward within two years, it should be discontinued completely to avoid unnecessary expenditure of public funds and raising false expectations among the public.
- H. Difficult decisions must be made before initiating something as controversial as predator control. Once decisions are made to implement a predator control program, then it is no longer an issue of fair chase. The management program is not hunting in the conventional sense, so it must be designed to minimize opportunity for predators to escape. The Department must apply the following criteria in making decisions about how a predation control program should be implemented:

Criteria:

1. **Effective:** The program must be able to achieve management objectives. Any techniques used must have a high probability of success or the Department should not proceed.
2. **Efficient:** The program must be implemented and completed within a preset period of time with the wisest use of resources possible considering weather conditions and calving activities.
3. **Affordable:** The program must be conducted within the resources available, including personnel, training, experience, and money.
4. **Safe:** The program must be safe for staff and others involved in implementation. Field operations to meet program objectives must not present undue risks to the lives or well being of program personnel.

5. Humane: Predation control should be conducted as humanely as possible.
 6. Advancement of Knowledge: The program should further research knowledge and improve management capabilities.
 7. Appropriate for Current Environmental Conditions: The techniques applied must be appropriate for snow conditions and other factors that exist at the time the program will be implemented.
- I. After reviewing the history, research management actions taken, previous and current Board findings, and predator control criteria laid out above, the Board of Game recommends the Department implement a Unit 19D East experimental management program according to the guidelines described below.

Guidelines for Unit 19D East Experimental Predator Management Program

1. Prioritized Methods of Removing Predators
 - a. Department staff should maintain the integrity and achieve the objectives of the program, including removing wolves and bears that use the 520 mi² Experimental Micro Management Area (EMMA). Predator removal techniques should most closely meet the criteria for predator control (page 4), including using helicopters, airplanes, or other mechanized vehicles.
 - b. The total EMMA project should continue for up to four years but could be terminated before 2007 if moose population size and bull:cow ratio objectives are met, or if the program is ineffective. The removal of both bears and wolves should be fully implemented by April 2004 or the project will be terminated.
 - c. All predation control efforts should be conducted with the cooperation and involvement of local residents as long as project criteria are met. This includes capture and removal of bears and wolves.
 - d. The Department and local governments would continue to encourage and train local trappers to take more wolves and hunters to take more bears and wolves within the EMMA in Unit 19D East. The Department will assist trappers in locating the best trapping sites.

2. Wolves:
 - a. Wolves should be removed from the EMMA by Department staff with as much public involvement as possible using the following techniques in order of priority:
 - Shooting from helicopters (most clearly meets the predator control program criteria on page 4); or
 - Darting from helicopters and euthanizing; or
 - Darting from helicopters and relocating.
 - b. If it is not possible to shoot wolves with the use of helicopters in 2003, the Department should immobilize and euthanize or relocate them as long as program criteria (page 4) are met and it is made clear that this is not a mandatory precedent for subsequent years or comparable programs.
 - c. Up to 40 wolves may be removed during the first year of the program. Wolves that attempt to repopulate the area will be removed in subsequent years.
 - d. The Department should remove wolves from the EMMA during October-November of each year during the life of the project. The Department should rely on local trappers to prevent or minimize the number of wolves repopulating the EMMA during mid-winter. If significant numbers of wolves remain in the EMMA by March 15, the department should remove the wolves in late March or April.

3. Bears:
 - a. Whether or not wolf control is initiated in 2003, bears in the EMMA should be captured and relocated during May-July 2003, and in additional years if bear removal proves consistent with the criteria (page 4).

- b. During May-July, adult male and female black bears and grizzly bears will be captured and relocated to remote state lands at least 150 miles from the EMMA. Bears will be:
 - Dated from a helicopter, and/or
 - foot snared from the ground.
 - c. About 30 black bears and up to 5 grizzly bears should be moved.
 - d. Black bear sows with cubs should not be moved.
 - e. Up to 30 relocated bears should be radiocollared to determine if and how quickly they return.
4. Moose Harvest Management
- a. The EMMA will be closed to moose hunting during the years in which intensive removal of wolves or bears is underway.
 - b. The EMMA will be reopened to moose hunting when intensive removal of predators ceases.
5. Research Program
- a. Expand browse surveys in March and April, 2003.
 - b. Assess calf mortality in 2003 and perhaps 2004, depending on the results of the management experiment in 2003.
 - c. Weigh 10-month-old female moose and conduct natality and twinning surveys.
 - d. Conduct a moose population estimate and composition survey in the EMMA in fall 2003.
 - e. Research design after 2003 will depend upon the results of the management experiment.
6. Post Predator Control Activities
- a. The Department should work with hunters, trappers and the Board to promote and develop adequate means to regulate wolf and bear populations in the McGrath area as a means of sustaining moose harvests over the long term.
 - b. The Department should work with land managers to improve moose habitat within the EMMA.