

Showdown in Alaska

**A Report By The
Wolf Management Reform Coalition**

May 1996

Wolf Management Reform Coalition • P.O. Box 103424 • Anchorage, AK 99510 •
907-258-WOLF or 907-586-1255

Showdown in Alaska

I. Introduction

Over the past year citizens across the nation have celebrated the historic and highly successful reintroduction of the gray wolf to Yellowstone National Park and the Northern Rockies. In Alaska, however, wolves remain an embattled species. A 1993 state Board of Game regulation encouraging the use of airplanes to hunt wolves helped boost wolf kills to a twenty year record during the two most recent hunting seasons for which data is available. Meanwhile recent political shifts in the Alaska legislature have given extremist hunting interests an opportunity to press for new wolf control mandates to artificially boost already thriving moose and caribou populations. The volume of Alaska's wolf management debate is set to reach record decibel levels this spring and again in the fall. In early May the legislature is expected to send Governor Tony Knowles legislation to establish a \$200 bounty on wolves and attempt to override the Governor's veto of intensive predator management legislation. In November, Alaska's citizens will consider a statewide ballot initiative to prohibit the use of airplanes to hunt wolves. Never before have the stakes been as great as they are now for conserving the nation's largest remaining wolf populations.

II. Wolf Control in Alaska: An Overview

Alaska has a long history of wolf killing. Early in this century wolves were hunted opportunistically by government agencies and individuals alike with virtually no controls. Adding to this, market hunters killed them by any method available to increase sales of moose, caribou and sheep. Between 1915 and 1968, bounties were paid and, before Alaska became a state in 1959, the federal government conducted systematic control of wolves using aerial shooting and poison.

After statehood, some recognition of the value of wolves occurred when they were given the classification of big game animal and furbearer. This offered limited protections through a system of hunting seasons and bag limits. As a further gesture of wildlife tolerance, the bounty

Showdown in Alaska

was stopped in 1968. Principally to curtail the airborne hunting of wolves in Alaska, the U.S. Congress in 1972 enacted the Airborne Hunting Act. The statute prohibits the use of aircraft to shoot or harass wildlife. However, since that time the Alaska Board of Game, a regulatory body independent of the Governor, has repeatedly adopted regulations which effectively evade or circumvent this federal law.

The mid to late 1970's saw the implementation of a number of specific state-sponsored wolf control programs. This was a response to a period of severe winters and excessive hunting of moose and caribou. Areas south of Fairbanks and east of Denali National Park received the brunt of the control efforts. By 1979, three new areas in West-Central Alaska were authorized, permitting the issuance of aerial hunting permits to pilot-gunner teams.

At the same time, the state used a long-standing "trapping" season on wolves as a backdoor means of boosting wolf kills. Traditionally the annual wolf trapping season authorized the use of guns to hunt wolves from the ground. In the 1970's the state authorized the use of "land-and-shoot" as an additional method of hunting wolves. The "land-and-shoot" practice entails hunters tracking wolves from the air, landing and using guns to shoot the often exhausted animals. This practice, much more efficient than ground-based trapping, caused the number of wolf kills to escalate and was opposed by many sportsmen as a violation of basic principles of hunter ethics. In 1991, as part of a larger compromise, the Board of Game prohibited "land-and-shoot" wolf killing. The prohibition would only last two years.

As the level of controversy rose rapidly between increasingly polarized elements of the public, the state Department of Fish and Game proposed that the Board of Game adopt a Strategic Management Plan for wolves. A panel of professionals and representatives of the public participated in the effort in 1990, but reached limited consensus. The Board of Game adopted the limited consensus but a new Board under a new Governor overturned the consensus plan in order to implement broader wolf control measures. To many minds, this represented the last good-faith effort by disparate members of the public in a government sponsored forum to set broad policy guidelines to address the issue of wolf control.

Showdown in Alaska

In November of 1992 the Alaska Board of Game adopted an extensive wolf control program for three large tracts of lands (Delta, Nelchina, and 40-mile, covering 20,000 square miles) for the benefit of hunters from Anchorage and Fairbanks. The state planned to shoot 300-400 wolves the first year, with 100-300 a year to be taken in the next three to five years. This would reduce wolves by 80 percent over an area of 20,000 square miles. Pilots would locate them from the air by following radio-collared members of the packs.

Overwhelmed by public pressure to stop the action, including real threats of a tourist boycott from outside the state and 7,500 letters, Governor Hickel halted the hunts and ordered a wolf summit meeting to be held in January of 1993. This meeting was a last-ditch effort to allow the public and professionals to meet and resolve their differences. The convening of a statewide wolf summit by a pro-development governor illustrated the extent to which public attitudes to wildlife management had changed. The public outcry precipitated by the Governor's proposal fed widespread public opposition. Moreover, tourist interests surfaced as major players in the controversy for the first time.

At its January 1993 meeting, the Board of Game formally canceled all three programs as originally conceived but in June adopted a new state-sponsored program for a large area south of Fairbanks employing ground-based snaring, trapping, or shooting. This program succeeded in killing about 120 wolves until February of 1995 when the new Governor Tony Knowles abruptly canceled the program in response to a provocative, nationally broadcast video showing a wolf that had chewed its leg off in a snare. Again, public pressure, including tourist interests, weighed heavily in the Governor's decision.

In ending the state-sponsored wolf control program, Governor Knowles stated that he would seek a review of the wolf control issue by the National Academy of Sciences. Governor Tony Knowles also announced that no program should be considered unless it met his three policy tests of cost effectiveness, scientific scrutiny, and broad public acceptability. Currently, panel selection for this review is contentious and the likelihood of success of this process is uncertain.

At its June 1993 meeting, the Board of Game also readopted "land and shoot" wolf

Showdown in Alaska

hunting but placed it in the trapping regulations. This regulation dramatically liberalized existing trapping season restrictions and has helped boost wolf kills to a 20 year record high in the two most recent trapping seasons for which data is available. In the 1993-94 season alone, over 1,500 of the estimated 5,000 to 7,000 wolves in Alaska were killed.

The regulation, which is still in effect today, imposes no bag limit on the number of wolves that can be shot and permits wolves to be killed statewide. By contrast, the earlier "land-and-shoot" program, allowed hunting only in certain areas of the state with a 10 wolf/hunter/season bag limit. In addition, the Board of Game purposely extended the trapping season until the end of April -- with increasing day length and often ideal deep snow conditions to track and kill wolves. Today, any Alaska resident can legally kill wolves simply by holding a current \$15 trapping permit, shooting during trapping season and walking at least 300 feet from his airplane before opening fire (semi-automatic rifles are the weapons of choice). Efforts including appeals for intervention by the U.S. Department of the Interior and a lawsuit brought by conservation groups including Defenders of Wildlife, the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, and Wolf Haven International have been unsuccessful in overturning this regulation.

To further boost wolf kills in Alaska, the Board of Game in 1995 adopted a new state-sponsored predator control program for three areas in central Alaska but with a delayed implementation date pending full review by the National Academy of Sciences and later approval of the Governor. This action followed the dictates of the Alaska legislature's new "intensive management" law, which requires predator control in cases of high human demand and low moose and caribou numbers.

The events of the 1990's suggest the possibility of a new attitude for predator control in Alaska. At least two governors have now acknowledged the broader implications for the state when predator control is practiced. No longer does program implementation rest solely with the Department of Fish and Game and the regulatory Board of Game. In addition, new constituencies such as tourism are playing a major role in government decision making. As a result, the stage is set for more enlightened wolf management policy to be formulated. As of 1996, three recent Board of Game appointments have shifted the balance of power on this

Showdown in Alaska

seven-member board to Governor Knowles, increasing the chances for more conservative, less intensive, wolf management in the near future.

III. Legislative Attempts to Mandate Wolf Bounties and Intensive Game Management

These positive developments may be offset and potentially overwhelmed by political changes in the state legislature which have resulted in on-going efforts to impose the most excessive predator control policies since Alaska statehood. Beginning with the passage of a bill mandating "intensive management" of game in 1994 (SB 77), and following with the introduction of a wolf bounty bill (SB 81) and more extreme amendments to SB 77 in 1996, the legislature has clearly challenged the authority of the Governor and the Board of Game to set policy direction on predator control.

Under the intensive management statute and proposed amendments, the Board of Game would be mandated to implement predator control for bears and wolves in areas of reduced prey populations before hunting can be curtailed. Proposed amendments to the intensive management statute require that no less than one-third of the harvestable surplus of big game (number of animals equal to the number born less natural mortality) be allocated to hunters. At this level of harvest (five times the current rate) predators populations are likely to become biologically unsustainable. This legislation passed in spite of full opposition from the Department of Fish and Game.

On April 19, 1996, Governor Knowles vetoed amendments to SB 77 approved by the legislature. The amendments are designed to curtail the Governor's ability to limit the intensive management provisions of the SB 77 law the legislature enacted in 1994. It is anticipated that an effort to gain the votes to override this veto will occur in early May.

The wolf bounty bill which passed the state senate in 1995 is under final consideration in the state house and is expected to be sent to Governor Knowles for his consideration in early

Showdown in Alaska

May. This legislation creates "harvest incentive areas" and pays hunters and trappers \$200 bounties for each wolf killed. Moreover, the bill reclassifies wolves from "Big Game" under hunting regulations and "Furbearer" under trapping regulations, to the general "unclassified game" category. Unclassified game is given no regulatory protections such as seasons and bag limits. Rats and starlings are other examples of unclassified game. The Department of Fish and Game and many individuals and groups across the state oppose this legislation.

The wolf bounty bill and the intensive management law, along with its proposed amendments, represent a new and deliberate effort by organized extremist sport hunting groups to reorient the power to manage wildlife in the state, to tie the hands of the professional management agency whose real responsibility it is, and to directly challenge the Governor along partisan lines. To date Knowles has expressed strong opposition to these unreasonable legislative measures.

IV. November Election Allows Citizens to Chart New Future for Alaska's Wolves

In October of 1995 the Wolf Management Reform Coalition was formed to gather the signatures necessary to put a citizen initiative on the ballot for the November 1996 general election. If approved by voters in November, the measure would prohibit the use of airplanes to hunt wolves in Alaska. However, there would be a narrowly drawn exception allowing the state to carry out limited wolf control by aircraft only in cases of biological emergencies.

The Wolf Management Reform Coalition is dedicated to promoting fair chase hunting and responsible management of wolves in Alaska. The Coalition's Executive Committee includes Joel Bennett and Doug Pope, both former members of the Alaska Board of Game. In addition, the coalition has assembled a prestigious steering committee of prominent Alaskans including Alaska's Former Governor Jay Hammond, Former Lt. Governor Lowell Thomas, Jr., Former Commissioner of Fish and Game Jim Brooks, long-standing conservationist Celia Hunter and noted biologist Jack Lentfer.

Showdown in Alaska

Although only 22,000 signatures were required to qualify the initiative, the coalition was able to submit a total of 33,214 names, exceeding all expectations, and providing a positive indication of the initiative's popular support. On February 7, 1996, a coalition of Alaskan citizens received certification from Alaska's Lt. Governor, Fran Ulmer, to place its Same-day Airborne Hunting Initiative on the November 1996 ballot. Momentum is continuing to grow, with good press coverage and support from many diverse interests, including tourist groups such as the Alaska Wilderness Tourism and Recreation Association.

The airborne hunting initiative aims to end a decades-old wolf management controversy and, specifically, to end the 1993 Board of Game "land and shoot" trapping regulation that is largely responsible for a dramatic increase in wolf kills. The initiative campaign seeks to establish in law the popular view that the use of airplanes to hunt or control wolves is a generally unacceptable method of predator management. A statewide poll conducted by Dittman Research Corporation in July of 1995 found that 63% of Alaskans would vote for the initiative as worded, and 71% felt the practice of "aerial-assisted wolf trapping" was unsporting and unethical.

The initiative provides an opportunity to demonstrate to the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the Board of Game, the Governor, and the state legislature that a much wider public than previously thought is interested in game management without predator control. Initiative proponents believe that a vote to end the use of airplanes to hunt wolves will help lay to rest long-standing controversies over wolf management in Alaska by showing state decisionmakers how politically misguided they have been with their own constituencies. Moreover, by precluding the use of airplanes, wolf control strategies will have to employ ground-based techniques that are far less efficient. Reliance on these techniques should help ensure that the state's wolf management policies no longer threaten the biological integrity of the nation's largest remaining wolf populations.

Despite evidence of broad-based public support for the initiative, predicted opposition from extreme elements of some hunting elements, such as the Alaska Outdoor Council (AOC), has already emerged. The January/March issue of AOC's magazine, Alaska Outdoor Council

Showdown in Alaska

News, announced the group's opposition to the same-day airborne initiative. Currently, AOC is reportedly instigating a legislative effort to cut funding for many of the state's best known wildlife programs, largely as a protest to Governor Knowles' 1995 decision to end the state-sponsored wolf control program and to encourage him to oppose a wolf ballot initiative. Although the outcome is far from certain, the November election will undoubtedly prove to be an historic turning point in the long-standing controversy over wolf management in Alaska.

Showdown in Alaska

Text of Initiative

"Be it enacted by the People of the State of Alaska"

"An Act relating to same-day airborne hunting of certain animals"

Sec. 16.05.783. Prohibition of Same-day Airborne Hunting.

(a) A person may not shoot or assist in shooting a free-ranging wolf, wolverine, fox, or lynx the same day that the person has been airborne. However, the board of game may authorize a wolf control program involving the shooting of wolves from the air if

(1) the commissioner of fish and game makes written findings based on adequate data demonstrating that a biological emergency exists and that there is no feasible solution other than airborne control to eliminate the biological emergency

(2) the program is conducted only by Department of Fish and Game personnel

(3) the program is limited to the specific geographic area where a biological emergency exists, and

(4) the program removes only the minimum number of wolves necessary to eliminate the biological emergency.

(b) This section does not apply to a person who was airborne the same day if that person was airborne only on a regularly scheduled commercial flight.

(c) A person who violates this section is guilty of a misdemeanor and upon conviction is punishable by a fine of not more than \$5,000, or by imprisonment for not more than one year, or by both. In addition, the court may order the aircraft and equipment used in or in aid of a violation of this section to be forfeited to the state.

(d) In this section, (1) "free-ranging" means that the animal is wild and not caught in a trap or snare; (2) "biological emergency" means a condition where a wolf population in a specific geographic area is causing the irreversible decline of a prey population to the point that the prey population may not likely recover without implementing wolf control.

Showdown in Alaska

ALASKA AIRBORNE HUNTING SURVEY - JULY 1995
Conducted by Dittman Research Corporation, Anchorage, AK

METHODOLOGY

In July 1995, five hundred seventeen (517), randomly selected Alaskans over the age of 18, located in 64 communities were personally contacted by professional interviewing employees of the Dittman Research Corporation. A random sample design was used which ensured that all households had an equal chance of being polled. Data processing was completed through a computer system featuring the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS/PC+) program. Citizen opinion measurements by the Dittman Research Corporation, utilizing these methods and data processing systems, have proven to be virtually perfect predictors of political election results in Alaska for the past twenty-five years.

FINDINGS

Question: "Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with this next statement: No person should use an airplane in the act of hunting wolves, and is that strongly (agree/disagree) or just somewhat (agree/disagree)?"

Response: 66% agree (50% strongly agree, 16% somewhat agree)
31% disagree (15% strongly disagree, 16% somewhat disagree)
4% unsure

Question: "Do you agree or disagree with this statement: It is unsporting and violates a basic principle of hunting ethics for a person to use an airplane in the act of hunting wolves?"

Response: 71% agree (57% strongly agree, 14% somewhat agree)
25% disagree (13% strongly disagree, 12% somewhat disagree)
4% unsure

Question: "Do you agree or disagree with this statement: If a biological emergency exists, such as a moose or caribou population in danger of local extinction, the Department of Fish and Game should be allowed to use airplanes to conduct limited aerial wolf control programs?"

Response: 69% agree (39% strongly agree, 30% somewhat agree)
26% disagree (17% strongly disagree, 9% somewhat disagree)
5% unsure

Question: "If Alaska had a statewide ballot initiative that said, "No person may shoot a wolf, coyote, wolverine, fox or lynx that same day that person is airborne. However, if authorities conclude that a biological emergency does exist, a same-day aerial wolf control program conducted by Fish and Game personnel only may be authorized" - Do you think you would vote for or against that initiative?"

Response: 63% For
33% Against
4% Unsure

Please note that the support for the initiative exceeded opposition in all geographic regions of Alaska:

Rural: 57% for, 45% against
Central: 55% for, 42% against

Showdown in Alaska

Southcentral: 65% for, 33% against
Anchorage: 66% for, 29% against
Southeast: 62% for, 27% against

Showdown in Alaska

CS FOR SENATE BILL NO. 81(FIN) IN THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA NINETEENTH LEGISLATURE - FIRST SESSION

BY THE SENATE FINANCE COMMITTEE
Offered: 4/26/95
Referred: Rules
Sponsor(s): Senators SHARP, Taylor, Miller

A BILL FOR AN ACT ENTITLED

An Act amending the Fish and Game code by removing "wolf" from the definition of "big game"; relating to the classification and taking of wolves; and providing for a harvest incentive on wolves taken in areas designated by the Board of Game.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA:

Section 1. AS 16.35 is amended by adding new sections to read:

ARTICLE 2. WOLF.

Sec. 16.35.210. WOLF. (a) The wolf is an unclassified game animal and a fur bearing animal. The department and the Board of Game may not classify the wolf as a big game animal and shall designate the wolf as an unclassified game animal.

(b) A wolf may be taken by any method or means approved for unclassified game of furbearers in the game management unit or subunit in which the wolf is taken.

Sec. 16.35.220. HARVEST INCENTIVE. (a) The department shall pay a harvest incentive of \$200 for each wolf taken in a harvest incentive area designated by the Board of Game and presented for identification and sealing or marking at an office of the department designated by the commissioner or at a regional office of the department designated by the commissioner. The harvest incentive may be paid only to residents.

(b) A person who claims the harvest incentive on a wolf shall present the raw skin with the right foreleg, including tibia and radius bones, attached in a natural state. The department shall remove the right foreleg and seal or mark each skin presented to indicate that the harvest incentive had been paid for that skin. The claimant may retain the skin after it is sealed or marked. The department shall pay the harvest incentive to the claimant within 30 days after presentment of the skin.

Sec. 2. AS 08.54.590(2) is amended to read:

(2) "big game" means brown bear, grizzly bear, caribou, moose, black bear, bison, Sitka blacktail deer, elk, mountain goat, musk-ox, [WOLF], wolverine, mountain or Dall sheep;

Sec. 3. TRANSITION. Notwithstanding AS 16.35.210, as added by sec. 1 of this Act and sec. 4 of this Act, a person who holds an unused gig game tag for wolf issued under AS 16.05.340(a) before the effective date of sec. 1 of this Act may take a wolf before January 1, 1996 under big game hunting regulations for wolf as those regulations existed on the day before the effective date of sec. 1 of this Act.

Sec. 4. AS 16.05.340(a)(15)(J) and 16.05.340(a)(21)(K) are repealed.