



TESTIMONY OF
TOM BANKS
ALASKA REPRESENTATIVE, DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE
BEFORE THE ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE RESOURCES COMMITTEE
REGARDING HOUSE BILL 256
“ACTIVE GAME MANAGEMENT / AIRBORNE HUNTING”
JANUARY 30, 2008

Chairman Johnson, Chairman Gatto, and Members of the House Resources Committee, I am Tom Banks, Alaska Representative for Defenders of Wildlife. Founded in 1947, Defenders of Wildlife has over one million members, supporters and subscribers across the nation, including 5,800 in Alaska, and is dedicated to the protection and restoration of native animals and plants in their natural communities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

By way of introduction, I come from a family of hunters and fishers and have enjoyed these and many other outdoor activities. I am a volunteer assistant Scoutmaster at the Boy Scout troop at St. John United Methodist Church in Anchorage. I own a home in Anchorage. Before joining Defenders of Wildlife, I have been a school teacher, naturalist, backcountry ranger and enforcement officer on state and federal lands in Alaska and elsewhere for twenty-five summers. I have a bachelor's degree in park and recreation administration and master's degree in ecology.

Defenders of Wildlife strongly opposes House Bill 256 because the proposed legislation would:

- § Thwart the intention of two voter-enacted bans on same day airborne hunting of wolves;
- § Add brown bears to the list of species that can be shot by private aerial gunners;
- § Eliminate the requirement that the Board of Game base its predator control programs on scientific information provided by the professionals at the Department of Fish and Game; and
- § Limit public participation on issues that affect all of Alaska.

House Bill 256 (HB 256) would delete the requirement that a comprehensive game management plan be in place prior to invoking aerial predator control. Aerial predator control should only be considered when it is part of a carefully thought-out program based on adequate supporting data, opportunity for public review, and public support.

HB 256 completely ignores and dismisses the intention of the voter-enacted bans on same-day airborne shooting of predators and seeks to move predator control decisions out of the realm of science and further toward an ideologically-driven decision-making process by the Board of Game, a body which is not representative of the diverse values that Alaskans place on their wildlife.

The Board of Game and certain hunting organizations claim that predator control is necessary to provide subsistence food for those whose survival depends on it. Unfortunately, this misrepresents the facts. Annual state harvest records show that the vast majority of the animals, two-thirds to three-quarters of the moose and caribou hunted in Alaska, are harvested by urban and out-of-state residents. Urban residents also harvest most of the animals in the majority of the current predator control areas. Rural people are often portrayed as the chief beneficiary of the predator control programs. Clearly, they are not. The desire to maintain the venerable tradition of hunting is important, but it does not come with the guarantee that every hunting outing will yield a catch. Fair chase implies that a successful hunt is not guaranteed, but depends on the skill of the hunter and the natural abundance of prey.

More than 56,000 square miles are currently under airborne predator control by private pilots and gunners who secure a permit. This is nearly 9.8% of the state's total land area, or roughly

one-third of the lands under state control. This sizeable portion of the state is currently subject to aerial shooting of predators. To increase the portion of Alaska wildlands subject to this practice, by loosening the standards in order to add them more hastily, is wrong and indefensible.

A state initiative sponsored by Alaskans for Wildlife is scheduled for a vote on August 26, 2008. HB 256 would re-write and tilt current law in a direction exactly opposite from the voters' intent as expressed in 1996 and 2000. Over 56,000 Alaskans recently signed an initiative petition to vote on this initiative in 2008. The Legislature should honor their wishes, not confuse the issue for them, and not undermine the initiative process by passing this legislation the way it is written.

Rather than streamlining the predator control process to make it less accountable to science and the Alaskan people, this important controversy should be decided on the basis of (1) the actions that a clear majority of Alaskans would find balanced and equitable; (2) the predator control, if any, that would be necessary in areas where there is true need to raise more prey for human sustenance or for protection of a prey population from experiencing a biological emergency; (3) the actions that are necessary to maintain the health of the landscape for the long run. It is well known that an excess of prey animals like moose or caribou can not be supported for the long term without damage to the habitat and impacts on their own health. Crowding an area with moose or caribou beyond the landscape's carrying capacity is not wise stewardship. "Conservation" or "stewardship" is what all responsible hunters and non-hunters agree upon, and this requires a long-term vision – something which is lacking in this bill.

The proposed law would eliminate the requirement that the Board of Game determine that "predation is an important cause for the failure to achieve" prey numbers and hunter success, and that "a reduction of predation can reasonably be expected to aid in the achievement of the objectives." Instead, the Board would merely need to conclude that aerial or same-day airborne shooting "would be conducive" to meeting one of its prey objectives or harvest levels. This is a significant relaxation in the standard by which predator control areas are established.

The requirement that the Board of Game decisions be based on information from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game would also be eliminated.

Like the existing intensive management statutes, the proposed bill fails to acknowledge the important role carnivores play in keeping ecosystems and prey populations healthy and vigorous. The widespread, intense culling of predators results in losses to ecosystem complexity, diversity, and function. This legislation positions the Board of Game to accelerate a program for political reasons – but without attention to whether such a program is fiscally prudent or biologically sound. The proposed legislation gives no recognition to the importance of conserving healthy ecosystems in their natural, wild condition – an important value that Alaskans and tourists from around the world recognize and experience each year in growing numbers. Alaska is special and unique, and with proper, conservative management, can remain that way.

We strongly oppose liberalizing the existing, already one-sided intensive management statutes. Alaska needs wildlife management laws that promote science-based, effective, fiscally prudent wildlife management that addresses the legitimate needs and viewpoints of all user groups. While it is valid to allocate wildlife to satisfy legitimate need for traditional foods, we need to accept that it is impossible to satisfy a desire for an unlimited quantity of moose or caribou for a growing number of hunters, particularly from out-of-state, while keeping Alaska's wild character. Unfortunately, HB 256 is aimed toward continuing to elevate numbers of prey animals beyond the landscape's ability to support them, and thus the legislation is grossly unbalanced. Alaska needs sound wildlife management laws that ensure sustainable predator and game populations for generations to come on a landscape that can produce "only so much" while maintaining its full complement of predators and prey in a wild, untamed setting.

In conclusion, wildlife management should include a "best available science" standard that the Board is required to apply in its decision-making. And Alaskans should not be shortchanged. It is clear that new legislation is needed to address the deficiencies in the intensive management statutes, but this bill in no way addresses the problems and provides the balance that's needed. I strongly urge you to oppose this bill.

Thank you. I would be happy to respond to any of your questions.