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PRESS RELEASE

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State Wildlife Officials Appalled at USFWS Decision

In a decision that ignores subsistence needs of local Alaskans and directly conflicts with sound wildlife management policies aimed at preserving a rapidly declining caribou herd on Unimak Island, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) dismayed state wildlife managers yesterday by deciding to take no action to help the Unimak Caribou herd.

The Unimak Caribou herd on Unimak Island in Southwest Alaska has declined dramatically over the past eight years, and field studies in the region have indicated that wolf predation on caribou calves is an important impediment to recovery. The herd has declined from more than 1,200 animals in 2002 with 54 bulls per 100 cows, to approximately 300 in 2010, of which perhaps only 20 were bulls.

The herd is designated a subsistence resource and state statutes require the department to manage for consumptive use by people. Caribou hunting has been closed and subsistence users on Unimak Island have few alternate sources of red meat. Last spring, state biologists developed a plan to restore the herd. The plan included selectively removing seven wolves from caribou calving grounds and, if necessary, trans-locating bull caribou from the Southern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd to supplement the Unimak herd.

The elements of the state's plan involving wolf removal were summarily dismissed by USFWS Regional Director Geoffrey Haskett in a Notice of Decision.

Alaska Department of Fish and Game's Division of Wildlife Conservation Director Corey Rossi said that the decision hampers the state's ability to manage wildlife held in trust by the state, but which happen to be located on federal lands. "We are obligated by law to manage that herd and all state-owned wildlife resources for the benefit of our citizens. This decision severely limits our options and puts this valuable subsistence resource in even further jeopardy." Rossi said.

"If action is not taken soon, hunting will remain closed for years. Moreover, there is the real possibility of losing not only this caribou herd, but also the wolf population, which depends on the caribou to survive," said Bruce Dale, Regional Supervisor.

Rossi added that land ownership patterns complicate the issue. "In recent years, we were able to conduct predator control to reverse the decline of the Southern Alaska Peninsula herd because that herd calves on state lands. The Unimak herd calves on federal lands. When we announced our intention to use the same strategy

to rescue the Unimak herd, Acting USFWS Director Dan Ashe threatened to prosecute state biologists if they accessed the refuge without a federal permit,” Rossi explained.

Board of Game Chairman Cliff Judkins also shared concerns about the decision. “ANILCA requires the federal government to consider subsistence use as the highest priority. I don’t understand how they can turn their backs on subsistence users,” Judkins said.

Judkins said the decision clearly illustrates differences in the management of the state and federal agencies. “While federal land managers focus on protecting ‘wilderness character,’ the state is charged with managing wildlife on a sustained yield basis for the maximum benefit of Alaskans,” he said.

Rossi said the state is carefully weighing its options to conserve this herd. “We have an obligation to our citizens to restore this valuable subsistence resource in spite of the lack of federal support.”

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