

Note: Proposal 141 was accepted by the Board of Game as an Agenda Change Request for consideration at the Statewide Regulations Meeting in March 2016.

PROPOSAL 141 - 5 AAC 85.056 Hunting seasons and bag limits for wolf. Change the wolf hunting season dates near Denali National Park as follows:

Change the season for hunting of wolves on lands in Unit 20C in the Stampede Corridor (Wolf Townships), adjacent to Denali National Park, from August 10 – May 31 to August 10 – April 15 to eliminate the overlap between the bear baiting and wolf hunting seasons.

WHAT IS THE ISSUE YOU WOULD LIKE THE BOARD TO ADDRESS AND WHY?

The recent change in hunting regulations allowing for the taking of brown bears at bait stations along with the lengthening of the wolf hunting season to May 31 has exposed wolves that are attracted to bait stations to increased and unforeseen harvest pressure in the Stampede Corridor within Unit 20C.

In early May 2015, Denali National Park and Preserve staff learned that a collared male wolf from the East Fork pack (1507GM) and an un-collared and reportedly pregnant female wolf were legally shot by a hunter outside of the park near the Stampede Trail. GPS data provided by 1507GM's collar indicated that he had spent most of the prior week at a location within a mile of the location where he was shot. Upon investigation, park staff learned that there was a bear baiting station within a quarter of a mile from where the two wolves were shot and the bait station was the same location where GPS data indicated the collared wolf had been the prior week.

There was no evidence that the East Fork pack denned in 2015. The loss of the pregnant female thus may have represented a loss of the reproductive potential for this pack and potentially represents the first time that the East Fork pack has not produced pups in over 28 years of continuous monitoring of this pack.

Although it was known that the open season for bear baiting in the Stampede area (April 15-June 30) overlaps the hunting season for wolves this was the first time that we had evidence that a bear baiting station attracted wolves and increased their vulnerability to hunting. Park staff shared the information gathered from our investigation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. Soon after, the Commissioner issued an emergency order closing the wolf hunting season in the area two weeks early, stating that: *"The department has received new information that has led to the decision to close wolf hunting in the area of Game Management Unit 20C along the Stampede Trail near Denali National Park. Trapping seasons are already closed for this regulatory year. The normal hunting season for wolves ends on May 31 in this area. There are no conservation concerns for wolves in Game Management Unit 20C, which includes a large portion of the park. However, changes in bear hunting regulations have increased the chances of wolves that primarily inhabit the park being taken as they venture on to adjacent lands. On average, this general area has a harvest of about four wolves per year and, prior to this year, little of that harvest had occurred in May. The controversy regarding the so-called "wolf buffer" is centered around the allocation of wolves between harvest through trapping and hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities for Park visitors. Allocation issues are the purview of the Board of*

Game. This temporary closure will allow the board to revisit the issue in light of the new information without additional take of wolves this May adding to the controversy

Although wolf populations may be able to compensate for losses from low levels of harvest through increases in reproduction or immigration or reductions in emigration, at low densities, the ability for the wolf population to compensate through movement in or out of the population is limited by fewer wolves available. The wolf population in Denali National Park and Preserve is currently low and the effect of additional harvest, particularly during the season when females are pregnant, can remove the reproductive capacity of for entire packs as seen this previous spring. Thus, the timing of this unforeseen additional harvest (which overlaps with the whelping and nursing period) combined with the current population status indicate the potential for population level impacts and present a legitimate conservation concern.

In the Stampede Corridor, black bear baiting has been legal for some time, but has not been commonly practiced as black bears are not common in the area. The regulation change in 2012 to allow the take of brown bears over bait likely increased the use of bait stations in this area. Current regulations allow bear baiting to occur from April 15-June 30. A concurrent change to the wolf hunting season extended wolf hunting through the end of May. Wolves are known to be attracted to bear baiting stations (Bump et al 2013) but the effect of these bear hunting regulations on wolf take (legal until May 31 under existing regulations) was unforeseen when the bear hunting regulations were adopted. The take of at least two wolves from the East Fork pack on state lands north of Denali National Park in May 2015, described above, was likely the result of more hunters being in the field to hunt brown bears at bait stations from April 15-June 30, under regulations adopted for this area (GMU 20C) by the Board of Game in 2012. This unexpected take led to an Emergency Closure by the Director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation on May 15, 2015.

There are several unforeseen consequences of additional wolf take in the Stampede corridor. First, take of wolves from April 15-May 31 coincides with the period when females are pregnant or nursing young pups. As seen this spring, loss of a pregnant female can remove the reproductive potential of a pack. This could have significant impacts to the local population of wolves. Second, wolf packs that travel onto state lands in the Stampede corridor adjacent to Denali National Park are typically the wolves observed by bus passengers along the Denali Park Road. The potential for hunting to affect viewable packs that den in eastern areas of Denali during mid-April and May, makes it advisable for the Board of Game to consider this proposal for a change in the wolf hunting season. Third, this take, when pelts are not in prime condition reduces opportunities for trappers in the area.

PROPOSED BY: Denali National Park and Preserve (HQ-2016-ACR20)
