



2011 POSITION STATEMENT INTENSIVE MANAGEMENT OF BIG GAME

THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



INTRODUCTION

The Wildlife Society is a non-profit, international organization of professional wildlife researchers, enforcement personnel, and managers. It is dedicated to the sound stewardship of wildlife resources and the environments upon which wildlife and humans depend. The Alaska Chapter is an affiliate organization of over 200 wildlife professionals living and working in Alaska. Most Chapter members are wildlife biologists for state, federal, private, or academic institutions.

The Alaska Chapter adopts position statements on important wildlife management issues in the State. Our purpose for this position statement is to update our 1995 position statement regarding the Intensive Management Law, recommend appropriate amendments that would reconcile the law with sound wildlife-management practices, and provide recommendations to improve its implementation.

BACKGROUND

During its 1994 session, the Alaska Legislature passed HCS CSSB 77, “An Act Relating to the Powers of the Board of Game and to Intensive Management of Big Game to Achieve Higher Sustained Yield for Human Harvest.” The current regulation is found in AS 16.05.255 (e-g).

In its current form, the intensive management law requires the Board of Game (Board) to identify populations of caribou, deer, and moose in the state that are to be managed for high human harvest, to establish population size and harvest objectives for these populations, and to develop regulations for intensive management. The Board is precluded from significantly reducing hunter harvest of these populations through restrictions without enacting intensive management regulations unless the Board can demonstrate that intensive management would (1) be ineffective, based on scientific information, (2) be inappropriate due to land-ownership patterns or (3) be against the best interest of subsistence uses.

Portions of the Intensive Management Law have been challenged three times through voter initiatives. The two initiatives (1996 and 2008) and one referendum (2000) prohibited same-day airborne shooting of wolves (and certain other species) by private pilots, and established an "emergency" standard for implementing wolf control programs. Two of the initiatives passed and one failed.

Intensive management plans have generally been supported by citizen advisory committees (AC's) that advise the Board. However, on two occasions, five of the state's intensive management plans have been challenged successfully in Alaska Superior court by groups opposing them.¹

¹ Appendix A — Provides a detailed summary of methods, target species, geographical scope, legislative actions, and court actions for intensive management from 1994 to March 2010 in Alaska.



2011 POSITION STATEMENT INTENSIVE MANAGEMENT OF BIG GAME

THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



FINDINGS

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society finds that:

1. Implementation of AS 16.05.255 (e-g) should be one of many legitimate, beneficial, and legal options for a professional wildlife management program. The program should be carried out in a scientific and sound manner that minimizes the long-term risk to the integrity of an ecosystem, conducted to manage human harvest prudently to maximize prey populations, and structured to allow maximum potential for scientific evaluation.
2. Support for wildlife and wildlife management depends on the public's ability to participate effectively in management decisions that address the needs and concerns of all Alaskans.
3. AS 16.05.255 (e-g) has reduced the flexibility of the Board to adopt adaptive management strategies for managing predators and their prey for the benefit of all Alaskans. In the absence of identified minimum biological standards and adequate funding, legislatively mandated prescriptions for management, such as AS 16.05.255(e-g), seldom benefit wildlife or wildlife users.
4. AS 16.05.255(e-g) places restrictions on Board authority to regulate the taking of identified big game prey populations that are unnecessary and may contradict recognized scientific principles of prudent wildlife management. Furthermore, these restrictions may be counterproductive by inhibiting the Board from allowing increased harvest during transient periods of relative abundance. This is due to the Board's inability (without instituting intensive management) to restrict harvest in the future when conditions beyond management control change to reduce productivity or abundance.
5. The benefits of intensive management programs may be overshadowed by the cost to implement them and the direct financial impact to other competing Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG) management programs.
6. Intensive management can have unintended long-term consequences in multi predator-prey systems, such as competition or replacement between predators. For instance reducing wolf populations could lead to increasing meso-predators such as coyotes. Similarly, high-density populations of moose are more susceptible to severe winter weather events.

Prescriptions for predator reduction can have unknown, and potentially deleterious consequences on the affected predator species and their ecosystems. Therefore, wildlife professionals need to implement monitoring and evaluation programs that include built-in feedback mechanisms. They must also communicate to the public and decision-makers the limitations of our understanding and the complexities of the potential consequences of intensive management. One such consequence may be the necessity to harvest cows and sometimes calves.

7. Implementation of Board-approved intensive management plans have led to management conflicts between agencies and created challenges to management on an ecosystem-wide basis.



2011 POSITION STATEMENT INTENSIVE MANAGEMENT OF BIG GAME

THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



8. Management programs designed to benefit one species, such as moose, may have indirect negative effects on other species, such as caribou or sheep. One example is predator control that is designed to favor moose could result in unsustainable populations of caribou or other prey species.
9. Typical intensive management techniques, such as predator control and habitat improvement, are not practical for increasing deer populations in Alaska. Biological and management situations for deer in coastal habitats are substantially different from those for moose or caribou.
10. Human harvest of ungulates is not an equivalent ecological replacement for the natural harvest mechanisms of wolves and bears.
11. Intensive management is inextricably tied to social realities. For instance, cow and calf harvest, which has been revoked by local citizen advisory committees (AC's) as socially unacceptable in some areas, could hinder ADFG's ability to prevent prey populations from exceeding carrying capacity.
12. Ungulate populations are affected by weather, disease, habitat, fire regime, predation, as well as harvest by humans and other factors.
13. The current population objectives may not reflect sustainable population levels under current environmental conditions. Continued habitat assessments and monitoring (e.g. browse monitoring), are strongly recommended.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Therefore, the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society recommends that:

- I. Section I of the enabling legislation and AS 16.05.255(f) and (g) should be modified to include language that clearly recognizes the need to manage based on scientific wildlife management principles.
- II. Prior to application of intensive management law AS 16.05.255 (e-g), the following minimum scientific standards are recommended:
 - a. Baseline population levels should be estimated for all affected predator and prey populations.
 - b. Investigations should be conducted to identify sources of mortality (at a minimum, predator, disease, nutrition, and weather effects) for all affected prey populations.
 - c. Direct indices (e.g., browse removal rates, range inventory) and indirect indices (e.g., twinning and parturition rates, body weights) should be used to assess baseline habitat conditions.
 - d. Extended (or long term) monitoring of all minimum scientific standards is recommended during and following intensive management.



2011 POSITION STATEMENT INTENSIVE MANAGEMENT OF BIG GAME

THE ALASKA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY



- III. The public should be invited and encouraged to participate in intensive management planning decisions using open deliberative decision-making through the local AC, Board, and other innovative processes consistent with basic intensive management principles and operational guidelines.
- IV. Ungulate population objectives should be based on evidence of the capability of habitat and forage resources to sustain elevated population levels and harvests.
- V. Intensive management should be implemented using an adaptive management approach where research findings can be used in a deliberate way to improve management using ongoing review and revision.
- VI. Intensive management programs should be assessed by measuring all potential positive effects, such as increased ungulate harvest and other identified benefits, and all potential negative effects, such as overuse of trails, depletion of predator or non-target prey populations, and displaced local hunters. A detailed overview of total costs associated with each intensive management plan should be presented to the Board each regulatory year.
- VII. Appropriate state, federal, and private agencies and organizations should be encouraged to develop integrated resource management plans that include methods to manipulate habitat (e.g., crushing, fire suppression, and prescribed fire) to meet management objectives formulated in area-specific intensive management plans.
- VIII. The legislature should provide ADFG and other appropriate state agencies with sufficient resources to implement and monitor intensive management, including habitat management programs.
- IX. ADFG should increase efforts to inform the public of the inherent complexities of intensive management, including the potential need for moose cow and calf harvest and the differences between proximate and ultimate causes of calf mortality, as necessary.