



## U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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*News*

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### **USFWS Selects “No Action Alternative” and Issues “Finding of No Significant Impact,” on Unimak Island EA**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) released today its decision related to an Environmental Assessment (EA) of management alternatives for the Unimak Island caribou herd (UCH). In December, 2010, the Service, in cooperation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G), prepared an EA to analyze management options for responding to the declining Unimak Island caribou herd. The EA was released to the public at that time, initiating a public comment period that extended through January 31, 2011 and produced approximately 95,000 comments. In consideration of the public comments received, and following a thorough evaluation of pertinent laws, refuge regulations, and policy, the Service has decided that the No Action alternative is warranted at this time, and issued a Finding of No Significant Impact resulting from that decision.

The Service believes that the No Action alternative achieves the best balance between three refuge purposes: conservation of fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity, providing continued opportunities for subsistence, and protecting wilderness character. We conclude that the three predator control alternatives showed some potential to improve future subsistence opportunities, but with impacts upon both the natural diversity and wilderness character of Unimak Island. These policy considerations do not support a decision to undertake such direct action to enhance the Unimak caribou herd.

The UCH size has fluctuated considerably over the last century, from a high of 7,000 in 1925 to near-zero in the 1950s. From 2002 through 2009, the UCH declined from a population of approximately 1,261 to the present low of 400. Since 2005, there has been little calf recruitment into the UCH, and it has an unusually low number of bulls in proportion to cows. In 2009, all hunting for caribou on Unimak Island, including subsistence hunting, was suspended.

In March 2010 the Alaska Board of Game established the “Unimak Wolf Management Area.” This action established population objectives for caribou and wolf on Unimak Island and authorized the ADF&G to conduct wolf control operations to achieve those objectives. Because most lands on Unimak Island are part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Service must approve any such actions on those federal lands. This requirement resulted in the preparation of the EA.

The alternatives described in detail in the EA and analyzed for their impacts to the environment included the selected No Action alternative (Alternative A) without predator control; the ADF&G’s proposal to use airplanes and helicopters to selectively shoot wolves preying on caribou calves (Alternative B); Alternative C, which would have shifted the shooting of wolves from helicopter to

fixed-wing aircraft; and Alternative D, which would have eliminated aerial gunning completely, though aircraft would have been used to support ground-based control actions. While at the conclusion of the EA the Service was inclined to support action on Unimak, further evaluation of refuge purposes leads us to believe that the No Action alternative represents the best balance among those mandates.

“By selecting the No Action alternative,” said U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska Regional Director Geoffrey Haskett, “the Service recognizes the value of the use of predator control as a valid wildlife management tool in support of subsistence when appropriate; however in this case our analysis did not support such a decision. While we recognize that today’s decision does not reflect the state’s preferences, we remain committed to working with the state on this and other issues. We are committed to monitoring caribou and predators on Unimak Island, and to implementing specific studies in cooperation with ADF&G.”

The Service previously approved permits for ADF&G to radio-collar caribou calves and cows for monitoring purposes on Unimak Island, and for the translocation of caribou bulls from the Southern Alaska Peninsula. These permits remain in effect, and the Service encourages collaboration and cooperation in these activities.

*The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit [www.fws.gov](http://www.fws.gov).*