



U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE IZEMBEK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE UNIMAK ISLAND CARIBOU HERD ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT NEWSLETTER

ISSUE NO. 2 - DECEMBER 2010

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has prepared an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze management options, including a No Action alternative, for responding to the declining Unimak Island caribou herd (UCH). Unimak Island, slightly larger than the State of Rhode Island, is the easternmost island of the Aleutian Islands located 700 miles southwest of Anchorage (see map). It is the only island among the Aleutians with naturally occurring populations of caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), and wolf (*Canis lupus*). Over ninety percent of Unimak Island is within the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) and is managed by the Izembek National Wildlife Refuge headquartered in Cold Bay, Alaska. Ninety-eight percent of the Refuge is congressionally designated wilderness.

The preparation of this EA has been prompted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) proposal to conduct a predator control management action on the Refuge to increase the UCH and restore it to sustainable numbers sufficient to allow hunting again by Federally-qualified subsistence users. The ADF&G is a cooperating agency with the Service in the preparation of this EA in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) because of the broad authorities both agencies have for managing fish, wildlife, and habitat resources on Unimak Island.

This EA will be used as a resource to guide the Service's decision for selecting a management action that addresses the declining UCH in a manner that is consistent with, and necessary to achieve, the Refuge mission and purposes under the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA), Wilderness Act, and National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act. The Service's decision will also, to the extent practical, be in accordance with the ADF&G's constitutional and statutory provisions to manage Alaska's fish and wildlife resources on a sustained yield basis. In addition to guiding a management decision for the UCH, this EA will be used to determine if the ADF&G's proposal would have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose and need of the proposed action is to stop the decline, and the possible loss, of the entire caribou herd on Unimak Island in order to provide for continued subsistence hunting opportunities by Federally-qualified subsistence users and is intended to ensure that the UCH continues to be a viable component of the Unimak Island ecosystem.

BACKGROUND

In 2009, all hunting for caribou on Unimak Island, including subsistence hunting, was suspended for conservation reasons. While caribou herds throughout Alaska commonly undergo major fluctuations in population size, the current downward trend of the UCH may be noncyclic and irreversible without management intervention. Since 2005, there has been little calf recruitment into the UCH and it has an unusually low number of males in proportion to females. From 2002 through 2009, the UCH declined from a population of approximately 1,261 to the present low of 400. While multiple factors (e.g., nutrition and habitat condition, disease, climate change, predation, and hunting) may have contributed to the UCH decline, the most plausible, or at least a major explanation, is predation. Other than suspension of caribou hunting, predation is the one factor that management is best able to address in order to improve the UCH numbers in the future. To prevent the loss of the UCH, or a prolonged period with a depleted population, the ADF&G proposes to reduce predation by wolves on the UCH for a period of time sufficient for recovery to sustainable harvest by subsistence users.

PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

The alternatives described in detail in this EA, and analyzed for their impacts (i.e., natural environment, subsistence use, other public use, and wilderness character) represent three alternatives identified as being reasonable for achieving the purpose and need for the ADF&G's predator control proposal and a No Action alternative. The four alternatives are: (A) a No Action alternative without predator control; (B) the ADF&G's proposed action to use helicopters to selectively shoot wolves while airborne that are preying on caribou calves; (C) an adaptation of the ADF&G's proposed action to use fixed-wing aircraft with marksman or ground-based teams dropped off by helicopter to selectively shoot wolves preying on caribou calves; and, (D) an alternative to use ground-based teams to shoot wolves in the area of the calving grounds, supported by reconnaissance airplanes. All predator control alternatives include the translocation of bulls from the Southern Alaska Peninsula caribou herd to Unimak Island to increase pregnancy rates among cows in the UCH. All four alternatives encompass ongoing monitoring and research activities in support of adaptive management. In addition to the four alternatives considered in detail, five other alternatives considered but not analyzed in detail are described along with rationale for their rejection.

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD

December 17, 2010 through January 31, 2011

The Service is seeking public comment on this EA, which proposes to stop the decline, and the possible loss, of the UCH in order to provide for continued subsistence hunting opportunities by Federally qualified subsistence users and to ensure it continues to be a viable component of the Unimak Island ecosystem.

A 45 day public comment period opens December 17, 2010. Written comments via fax, mail or email are requested by the close of business January 31, 2011. The Service has a contract with GAP Solutions, Inc. to assist with preparing the EA and collecting your comments. They can be submitted to the Service using any of the following methods:

Email: fw7_izembek_planning@fws.gov

Fax: 1-800-507-8557

U.S. Mail: GAP Solutions, Inc.
Unimak Caribou Herd Environmental Assessment
P. O. Box 2026
Pocatello, ID 83206-2026

The document is available online at:

<http://alaska.fws.gov/nwr/planning/nepa.htm>

If you need a paper copy please contact John Martin, Regional Refuge Ecologist, at:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1011 E. Tudor Rd.
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

Phone: 907-786-3670

Following the closing of the comment period, the Service will examine the comments and determine whether the Environmental Assessment action warrants a "Finding of No Significant Impact". If a Finding of No Significant Impact is warranted, we will select an alternative and implement the selected alternative on Unimak Island starting in May 2011.

