

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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## HICKEL BANS MUSK OX HUNTING IN ALASKA REFUGE

Secretary Walter J. Hickel today said the Department of the Interior will not permit the hunting of musk oxen on the Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

Secretary Hickel's announcement was prompted by action in the Alaska State House of Representatives, which last week passed a bill to allow the state Department of Fish and Game to issue big game hunting tags for the taking of musk oxen on Nunivak, a National Wildlife Refuge.

The Secretary vetoed a similar bill a year ago when he was Governor of Alaska.

"We have no intention of permitting such a hunt," Hickel said. "The musk ox is not a game animal and should continue to be developed for domestic purposes." "To permit such a hunt," the Secretary added, "would be contrary to the intentions of the conservation-minded people who worked so hard in the 1930s to import the first of these gentle animals to this country from Greenland."

"The musk ox is a rare animal and one which, through careful breeding and domestication, offers an excellent means of developing new industry in the Arctic.

"Any short-term profit which might accrue to the state through the sale of big game hunting tags for musk oxen would be more than balanced by the potential danger inherent in opening the door to possible further easing of hunting restrictions in the future because of pressure to increase the number of available trophy animals."

The musk oxen herd on Nunivak now numbers about 750, developed from 34 animals purchased in Greenland and established on the island in 1936.

The island, 18 miles off the Alaska coast on the Bering Sea, was set aside as a National Wildlife Refuge in 1929 under an executive order signed by President Hoover.

The land was withdrawn to permit the U. S. Department of Agriculture to conduct experiments in the development of musk oxen for domestic purposes, and also to conduct research on crossing and propagating reindeer and caribou to provide food for Alaska's native Indians and Eskimos. The program was transferred to the Department of the Interior in 1939.

The federal government and the state of Alaska have an agreement covering cooperative efforts in game and habitat management on Nunivak Island. However, any decision to permit hunting on the federal land would require the Secretary's approval.

"Eight years ago responsible authorities recognized the probability of the musk ox population on Nunivak Island reaching the carrying capacity of the available range," Secretary Hickel said. "At that time a management agreement was worked out with the state providing for position actions to limit further growth of the herd when it had reached a total of 750 animals.

"A seven-step program to handle additional animals was developed, with top priority going to projects to relocate and establish musk oxen in other parts of Alaska--including the Arctic North Slope--and to provide others to husbandrymen who would work on their domestication.

"Public hunting, even on a restricted, permit basis, was fifth in that list of priorities," Secretary Hickel said. "There is no indication at this time that we have taken care of restocking projects, zoological gardens and zoos, and other conservation programs to a point where we should destroy any animals for sport."

The Secretary said that the question of range condition on the island is such that the department is conducting a range survey, supervised by Dr. John Tener, chief of the Canadian Wildlife Service.

Tener, one of the world's outstanding authorities on musk oxen, surveyed the range both at Nunivak Island and on Alaska's North Slope in July 1968, and he is continuing a winter survey at the present time.

Hickel said he expects to receive Tener's report in a few weeks, at which time the department will prepare further recommendations on animal transplants.

"If it is determined that transplants are needed, we will cooperate fully," Secretary Hickel said.

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