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Organization: National Park Service

Action requested: closure of federal public lands in State Game Management Unit 22 to caribou hunting by non-federally qualified users for the 2026-2028 regulatory cycle. For subunit specific harvest limits described in federal regulations under 50 CFR 100.26(n)(22), each should include language stating, “*Federal public lands are closed to the taking of caribou except by federally qualified subsistence users.*”

This request is prompted by the most recent photocensus of the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH) that found the WAH has declined to 120,618 animals in 2025. This estimate, down from 152,000 caribou estimated in 2023, continues the precipitous decline that began in 2003. At the current rate of decline, approximately 10% per year, the herd will drop below 100,000 by 2027.

In response, at its December 2025 annual meeting, the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group set its herd management recommendation level at “critical, declining” – the most severe of all possible management levels. Additionally, the group proposed a total moratorium on hunting WAH caribou if its population falls below 75,000 animals, with hunting only to resume when the population again reaches 100,000 caribou.

Most of Unit 22 and a small part of Unit 23 on the Seward Peninsula are considered the winter range of the WAH. Although collared animals from the herd have not made use of the Seward Peninsula for six years now, some remnant groups of WAH caribou have been observed there, particularly in and around Bering Land Bridge National Preserve (BELA.) The portion of Unit 23 that coincides with the southeastern portion BELA is already closed to caribou hunting by non-federally qualified users August 31 – October 31. The dates of the closure in Unit 23 are tied to specific user conflict issues and are not necessary for Unit 22.

This action is necessary for the continuation of subsistence uses of WAH caribou by federally qualified users in Unit 22 and is consistent with existing closures to NFQU in Unit 23. Further restrictions on caribou harvest under both state and federal management systems are expected in response to the continued decline of the WAH. The State Board of Game will next take up state hunting regulations for this region under its regular cycle in 2027; the Federal Subsistence Board is scheduled to next take up federal hunting regulations in 2028 and BELA staff intend to submit a similar closure proposal in that cycle.