

Division of Wildlife Conservation

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Advisory Announcement

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Trappers Harvest Record Number of Wolves on Prince of Wales and Associated Islands in 2019/2020

(Douglas) – Trapping season for wolves has closed on Prince of Wales and associated islands (Game Management Unit 2) and trappers reported harvesting 165 wolves. That is the highest harvest recorded for Unit 2.

Changes to Unit 2 wolf harvest management went into effect for the 2019-2020 harvest season following a two-year process that included public meetings and review and endorsement by both state and federal regulatory bodies (the Board of Game and the Federal Subsistence Board) as well as the Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council and Fish and Game Advisory Committees.

The ADF&G, Division of Wildlife Conservation's (DWC) new management strategy for Unit 2 wolves manages harvest by altering the length of hunting and trapping seasons to maintain a fall population objective of 150 to 200 wolves established by the Alaska Board of Game.

The most recent Unit 2 wolf abundance estimate from fall 2018 (170 wolves, possible range of 147-202) was used to set the 2019-2020 season length. DWC's management strategy allows for a trapping season up to two-months long when the population estimate is within the object range (150-200 wolves). After consulting with Unit 2 trappers DWC managers set the 2019-2020 trapping season length at the full two months and encouraged them to moderate their efforts so the population would remain within the objective range.

Trapper harvest largely depends on the effort expended by trappers. Trappers are required to present each wolf hide to ADF&G for sealing and the number of trappers who seal hides is an indicator of wolf trapping effort. Over the past 20 years an average of 15 trappers per year have sealed wolves from Unit 2. During the 2019-2020 season 32 trappers sealed wolves from Unit 2.

“With the trapping season open for only two of the four and a half months allowed under regulation, we believe the unusually high harvest resulted from this apparent doubling of the normal trapping effort,” said Tom Schumacher, regional supervisor for the Southeast Region of DWC.

Since 2000, the annual reported Unit 2 wolf harvest has averaged 43 with a high of 77 in 2004. Conservative harvest regulations and management during part of that period are likely among the factors that resulted in

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lower harvests. In contrast, during the 1990s harvest was much higher, averaging 93 wolves per year with over 90 harvested in six years and over 100 harvested in three of those years. The previous record high occurred in 1996 when 131 wolves were harvested.

“Sustained high levels of harvest during the 1990s and rapid recovery from low abundance in 2014 and 2015 suggest the Unit 2 wolf population is productive and resilient,” Schumacher said. “We will have a better understanding of the current status of the Unit 2 wolf population after the fall 2019 population estimate becomes available. Wolves have a high reproductive potential, so the fall 2019 population may have been a good deal higher than the fall 2018 estimate.”

DWC uses a DNA-based mark-recapture technique to estimate wolf abundance. Results from the lab extracting and analyzing DNA from wolf hair samples collected from October through December 2019 should be available in July or August 2020, with the fall 2019 population estimate available several weeks later. The spatial extent of the 2019-2020 harvest will also be reviewed.

ADF&G will continue to manage Unit 2 wolves to meet the population objective and to provide sustainable harvest opportunity using the current management plan. That plan offers managers flexibility, and biologists will use the experience gained this year when setting future harvest season length. Options could include a shortened season or closing the season entirely.

“Because the management plan relies on population estimates, we will also continue to investigate new ways of estimating wolf abundance in forested environments,” Schumacher said.

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