

RC 23

Board to look at wolf-control programs [for Units 1A and 3]

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The potential for wolf control on Gravina Island is on the Alaska Board of Game agenda this week.

The board will consider two experimental wolf-control programs that would intend to remove wolves to boost the population and harvest of deer on Gravina Island and an area around Petersburg.

The Board of Game meeting starts Friday in Kenai.

Both wolf-control proposals are in response to findings that deer populations and harvests in the Ketchikan (Game Management Unit 1A) and Petersburg (GMU 3) areas are below objectives set by the Board of Game in 2000.

The objectives were set in accordance with the state's Intensive Management law that requires the identification of deer, moose and other ungulate game populations that are important for human harvest. In cases where a specific game population and harvests are below objectives set by the board, the board can authorize the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to conduct a predator-control program designed to increase the target population.

However, board approval doesn't mean that a predator-control program would start immediately.

For the proposed Gravina Island and Petersburg areas, Fish and Game would need to acquire more detailed data about the deer, wolf and bear populations, in addition to habitat information, before proceeding with an actual wolf-control program.

The information is important for understanding the complex variables that can affect deer populations, and to provide baseline data to measure how a predator-control program is working, according to Doug Larsen, the Southeast Alaska regional supervisor with the state Division of Wildlife Conservation.

"You want to be able to, as best we can, say, 'OK, that action had these results,'" Larsen said. "And in order to be able to say that, we need to ... have some sense of what's going on in the existing situation."

The existing situations in GMUs 1A and 3 are hazy.

While the department doesn't have precise estimates for deer or wolf populations in either area, it estimates that the deer populations are well below the board's objectives.

In GMU 1A, the objectives call for a deer population of 15,000 animals and an annual harvest of 700 deer.

"Although we do not have a reliable way to estimate deer numbers in Unit 1A, our deer pellet-group trends (a method to help estimate deer populations) suggest we are at a much lower level than 15,000," according to the proposed operational plan for Gravina Island.

Recent annual harvests of deer in GMU 1A have ranged between 200 and 300 animals.

In response to the low numbers, the Board of Game asked Fish and Game to initiate the intensive management process for the deer populations in GMUs 1A and 3. The department developed feasibility assessments for wolf-control programs in portions of those units.

The board reviewed the feasibility assessments in January, and asked the department to take the next step in intensive management process and develop wolf-control operational plans

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and regulatory language for the board to consider at its meeting that runs Friday through Tuesday at the Kenai Cultural Center.

Fish and Game's proposed operational plans for both areas — Gravina Island and the Unit 3 Predation Control Area that includes Mitkof Island, Woewodski Island and the Lindenberg Peninsula portion of eastern Kupreanof Island — are similar.

Both plans would be experimental, according to the department.

"This operational plan describes an experimental approach to adaptive management that will test predator control in a relatively small area on a low density deer population," states the operational plan proposed for Gravina Island. "The intent of this (intensive management) program will be to increase deer for harvest primarily by residents of Ketchikan using a cost-efficient predator control strategy that could potentially be conducted near other rural communities in Southeast Alaska where similar deer harvest concerns exist."

Specifically, the five-year effort would evaluate whether one or two experienced trappers using standard trapping techniques during the established wolf-trapping season can reduce wolf numbers enough to increase the deer population.

"In the treatment area, our goal is to remove all the wolves initially, then continue to monitor and trap the area to assure that wolves do not become established during the life of this program," according to the department.

Fish and Game would evaluate whether its techniques for estimating deer and wolf populations "can be refined enough to measure the effectiveness of (intensive management) methods," according to the proposed operational plan.

The department's ability to measure changes in predator abundance and the effectiveness of the proposed wolf-control effort is a "critical aspect of the process," according to the operation plans. However, Fish and Game is "unsure" of its ability to conduct those measurements at this time.

If the wolf-control programs were in effect, the department would need to monitor wolf numbers for the duration of the programs, according to the proposed operational plans.

"Determining wolf numbers and monitoring them over a period of several years would only be feasible through the marking of animals with radio collars," states the Gravina Island proposal. "This is turn would require the capture of and handling of wolves within both the treatment and comparison areas."

The comparison area for the Gravina Island program would be Cleveland Peninsula.

Fish and Game hasn't developed cost estimates for the data collection and predator-control components of the proposed efforts.

The potential costs would become clearer once specific data collection needs and techniques, as well as staffing requirements, are identified, according to Larsen.

"There's a fair amount of ongoing discussion in terms of some of those down-the-road activities that we still need to have," Larsen said.

Further information about the potential wolf-control programs for Gravina Island and the Petersburg area is available on the Alaska Board of Game website at: www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=gameboard.meetinginfo.