



May 22, 2015

The Noatak and Kivalina Advisory Committee (proposer) has submitted an Agenda Change Request (ACR) to the Alaska Board of Game requesting to change 5 AAC 92.540(9) Noatak Controlled Use Area (ACR 3). Under the Board's ACR policy, the Board will accept an ACR only:

- A) for a conservation purpose or reason;
- B) to correct an error in a regulation; or
- C) to correct an effect on a hunt that was unforeseen when a regulation was adopted.

The board will not accept an ACR that is predominantly allocative in nature in the absence of new information that is found by the board to be compelling. [5 AAC 92.005(a)(2-3)].

The author of the ACR suggests that new information is available that illustrates how movements of the Western Arctic caribou herd have changed and reduced the effectiveness of the Noatak CUA, and that this is affecting the success of subsistence caribou hunters in the villages of Noatak and Kivalina. There is a positive customary and traditional use finding for the Western Arctic caribou herd and Teshekpuk caribou herd combined, and an amount reasonably necessary for subsistence of 8,000–12,000 caribou, combined. .

With respect to ACR policy acceptance criteria:

- (A) The department is unaware of new conservation concerns regarding the Western Arctic caribou herd (WAH). The declining status of the WAH was addressed by the Board in March 2015 when new regulations, effective July 2015, were adopted to reduce harvest.
- (B) The department is unaware of an error in regulation that relates to this ACR.
- (C) The variations in WAH migration patterns described in the ACR have increased since the Noatak CUA was first established in 1988, and again when it was last modified in 2009. However, wildlife populations change through time and the relationship between migration, hunting, and the boundary of the CUA as outlined in the ACR is not fully an unforeseen circumstance. Both times when CUA proposals were considered in 1988 and 2009, the department and the board received testimony from residents of Noatak and Kotzebue indicating that they hunted up the Noatak River to at least the Cutler River in years when caribou had been scarce along the lower Noatak River. Thus, there is some indication that previous caribou

movement patterns probably resembled those observed during recent fall hunting seasons. This change in migration pattern is within the normal range of variability of most caribou herds.

The varying migration patterns of the WAH have made it more difficult for hunters from the communities of Noatak and Kivalina to access caribou during the fall hunting season. These changes have reduced the effectiveness of the Noatak CUA and resulted in the perception that nonlocal hunters and transporters are deflecting caribou from traditional hunting areas. Also, these changes in migratory movements have made it more difficult for hunters from the community of Noatak to access caribou during the fall hunting season.

However, the reasons for this change in migration patterns are not completely understood and may be the result of factors separate from, or in addition to, the distribution of nonlocal hunters and transporter activities in the Noatak drainage. Other contributing factors include: changes in seasonal weather patterns in northwest Alaska (prolonged, mild, fall weather delaying the onset of fall migration); the tendency for caribou to follow recent, established trails; and, the >50% decline in herd size that has occurred since 2003. Despite the high density of drop-off camps and frequent transporter flights within migratory pathways, caribou have not abandoned these areas to resume using areas closer to the community of Noatak as they did in past years. This suggests that nonlocal hunters may not be the sole, or even primary cause, of the decreased access to caribou experienced by Noatak residents during the last several fall hunting seasons.

The department recognizes the benefit of the Noatak CUA to reduce user group conflicts during the fall hunting season. However, based on factors influencing caribou migration patterns, changing the boundary of the CUA is not likely to improve Noatak's ability to acquire fall season caribou.

The department recommends this topic be considered by submitting a proposal for the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Arctic and Western Region in 2017.

Sincerely,



Bruce Dale
Director
Division of Wildlife Conservation