

ALASKA BOARD OF GAME FINDINGS  
NELCHINA CARIBOU PROPOSAL 21A  
96-102-BDG

The Nelchina caribou herd occupies a huge area of Southcentral Alaska and western Canada. During the 1950s this herd erupted reaching a peak population of 80,000 to 90,000 animals by the early 1960s. The herd crashed in the late 1960s and by 1971 numbered only 8,000 caribou. The Department and the Board recognized that careful restrictions on the harvest were necessary to rebuild the herd and instituted a permit drawing hunt in the mid-1970s. Annual harvests declined from about 9,000 in 1971 to about 500 shortly thereafter.

During the 1970s and 1980s the herd increased toward the management goal of 40,000 animals. Tier II permits replaced the permit drawing hunt, one of the most popular permit hunts in Alaska. During the early 1990s, permit numbers were increased greatly in an effort to harvest more animals and reduce the rate of population growth. However, unpredictable movements of the herd during hunting season, and reduced hunter success rates acted to keep harvests below desired levels. By 1996, the herd had increased to over 50,000 caribou and biologists warned that a population decline may result if harvests were insufficient to reduce numbers to about 40,000.

Based on public testimony and reports of Department biologists, the Board finds that:

1. Biological information on herd movements, range conditions, and growth of calves suggests that this caribou herd may decline from increased mortality and reduced survival if numbers continue to increase.
2. If the herd increases further and approaches levels reached in the early 1960s (80,000 to 90,000), a crash may again result and long-term damage to the range will occur.
3. Prudent and conservative management of this herd and its harvest has previously resulted in recovery of this herd from very low numbers. This is a wildlife management success story that can be continued with proper measures to regulate harvests in the 1990s.
4. In recent years, the harvest of Nelchina caribou has been about 5,000 animals annually, and has focused predominately on older bulls. A harvest of about 15,000 animals (5,000 bulls and 10,000 cows) is necessary in 1996 to reduce the herd to about 40,000 by spring 1997, given normal recruitment in 1996. However, the Board recognizes that logistical problems of managing the harvest may make such a large one-year harvest impossible to obtain. It may require two or more years of large harvests to reduce the herd.
5. In order to maintain an optimum bull:cow ratio and to harvest sufficient numbers of cows to reduce the herd it will be necessary to allocate permits such that the bull harvest does not exceed 5,000 animals. Furthermore, it will be necessary to require

hunters to shoot animals with certain antler characteristics in order to target cows. Biologists indicate that virtually all cows and very few younger bulls have six or fewer antler points on one antler. Certain permits will therefore be issued requiring hunters to shoot only animals with certain antler characteristics.

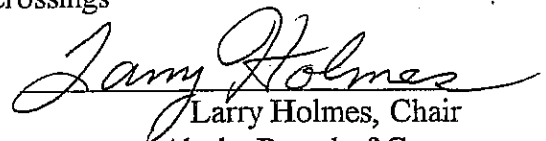
6. In order to obtain a large harvest, it will be necessary to open the season on 1 August and extend it into March. To avoid disrupting the rut and to avoid the potential for numerous problems associated with road-side shooting during road crossings of the Richardson and Tok-Cutoff highways, it is appropriate to close the season during the period 21 September to 20 October. However, if conditions are suitable to allow harvest of the cow segments of the population during this time, the Department should open the season by Emergency Order to ensure an adequate harvest.

7. The Board finds that there is ample potential to extend hunting opportunity to many residents of the state as a result of growth of the Nelchina caribou herd and the need to institute large harvests to reduce its size. Such opportunity includes use of primitive weapons early in the hunting season.

8. The Board finds that issuance of Tier II permits only will be insufficient to obtain the necessary harvests of cows. The Board also finds that, for now, it is not necessary to limit participation in the hunt which is focused on the cow segment of the population. Accordingly, Tier I registration permits available by mail will be issued for a cow segment of the population.

9. The Board finds that there is a serious potential for problems related to road-side incidents, including excessive wounding loss, human injuries due to accidental gunshots, and traffic accidents, when large numbers of hunters encounter migrating caribou near the road system. Careful monitoring of the hunts will therefore be necessary with emergency order closures by the department if problems occur.

10. The Board finds that an effort to reduce a major caribou herd by instituting a large, one year harvest of up to 15,000 animals is a bold, unprecedented step in caribou management in Alaska. Although a crash is probably not imminent, prudent management suggests that in order to continue the success story of managing this herd, it is time to take this action. By doing so, the Board intends to reduce the risk of overpopulation problems while providing a significant increase in hunter opportunity for resident hunters. However, we must also carefully avoid creating problems that may occur when large numbers of hunters and caribou interact at major road crossings

  
Larry Holmes, Chair  
Alaska Board of Game

Date: 4/18/96  
Juneau, Alaska  
Vote: 6-0-0-1