

Wilderness Watch

NEWS RELEASE

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Fish and Wildlife Service Denies Alaska's Wolf Killing Plan

Service cites public opposition and re-evaluation of Refuge laws in reaching its decision.

In a move lauded by Wilderness Watch and other conservation groups, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has decided to deny the State of Alaska's proposal to shoot and kill adult wolves from the air and gas pups in their dens on Unimak Island. Part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge, Unimak lies just off the tip of the Alaska Peninsula and is the largest and easternmost island of the Aleutian island chain. It's home to waterfowl and shorebirds, brown bears, caribou, wolves, and wolverines. Ninety three percent (910,000 acres) is Wilderness.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service has made the right decision for the Unimak Wilderness. This predator control plan would have violated the most fundamental principles of the Wilderness Act by allowing human intervention of the natural processes at work in the Unimak. And, it would have set a terrible precedent for predator control on National Wildlife Refuges and designated Wilderness elsewhere in Alaska," said Fran Mauer, Alaska Chapter Chair for Wilderness Watch.

The FWS's environmental assessment (EA) states the purpose for killing wolves on Unimak Island is to increase the number of caribou for subsistence hunting. The caribou population has declined recently, but causes for the decline are not known, with caribou numbers on the island having significantly fluctuated in the past. According to subsistence studies, local hunters primarily hunt caribou from the nearby Southern Alaska Peninsula herd.

"Killing wolves to attempt to artificially boost caribou numbers is completely unacceptable in a National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness. The goal of increasing caribou numbers for subsistence hunting is at odds with the reality that subsistence hunters don't hunt here. All caribou killed in the past decade were killed by non-local and non-resident hunters, most of whom were commercially guided trophy hunters," said Kevin Proescholdt, a Wilderness Watch Board member.

The Fish and Wildlife Service cited public opposition (95,000 people commented on the EA) and a re-evaluation of applicable Refuge laws, regulations and policies as guiding its final decision to adopt the "No Action Alternative," which was supported by Wilderness Watch. Citizens commented that the proposal violates the Wilderness Act and other federal laws and that the EA is inadequate. The decision memo states FWS's initial inclination was to approve the State's proposal. However, the agency concluded that killing wolves would negatively impact natural diversity and wilderness character, two purposes of the Refuge, and far outweigh the potential benefit of possible future subsistence hunting, a third purpose of the Refuge. The FWS also recognized that the use of helicopters would degrade wilderness character.

There's just one catch, however. Alaska has the option of translocating bull caribou to Unimak Island from the Southern Alaska Peninsula, pursuant to a permit issued in May 2010. Any such action, unfortunately,

would still result in a manipulation of wilderness character and have impacts to natural diversity. The Fish and Wildlife Service approved this permit with a Categorical Exclusion, and it remains valid through 2012. This exception aside, Wilderness Watch applauds the agency's selection of the no action alternative here and its resulting preservation of the wilderness character of Unimak Island.

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