

Helicopter wolf kill in Alaska worries U.S. park service

March 17 2009, By Kyle Hopkins

A new predator control effort that has the state of Alaska shooting wolves from helicopters is raising alarms with the National Park Service.

The state Department of Fish and Game on Saturday began killing the wolves in hopes of boosting caribou numbers in the Fortymile herd that ranges from the Steese Highway east of Fairbanks to the Canadian border. At least 30 wolves have been killed so far.

The goal is to shoot as many as 150 wolves before they get too many caribou calves and before the snow and the wolf tracks disappear.

But Park Service officials, who learned of the plans late last week, questioned the state's approach. Among the concerns raised in interviews and in Park Service documents:

- What will the shooting mean for wolves that travel between state land and a neighboring, 2.5-million-acre [national preserve](#)?
- What if the state overestimated how many wolves live in the area, and kills too many?

"We don't want to see the wolf population, or those packs that frequent the Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, be eliminated or reduced significantly," said Debora Cooper, the Park Service's associate regional director for natural resources.

After meeting with the superintendent of the national preserve last week, the state agreed not to shoot wolves wearing radio collars that the Park Service uses for research, and to limit shooting of animals in certain wolf packs that are known to move in and out of the preserve, said regional Fish and Game supervisor David James.

[Alaska](#) says it's tracking the number of wolves left in the area. If it overestimated the numbers, it won't shoot as many as planned.

"We're not trying to eradicate the wolf population," James said. The plan is to drive down predator numbers for up to five years, giving the caribou herd a chance to build from a current count of roughly 40,000 caribou to between 50,000 and 100,000.

This is the second time in recent years that the state has used helicopters to shoot wolves. Last year, Fish and Game turned to helicopters - more deadly and efficient than fixed-wing planes - on the Alaska Peninsula.

Helicopters will be used in that region again this year, James said. All told, six wolf-kill programs are planned around the state. Such programs traditionally rely on trappers and private pilots in planes to get the job done.

In each case, the state will have to decide if the current approach is working or if it makes sense to turn to helicopters, he said.

Defenders of Wildlife, a national environmental group that has targeted Gov. Sarah Palin's support of aerial predator controls in the past, slammed the new helicopter kill Monday.

"The Palin administration is showing complete disregard for the integrity of Alaska's national parks, which are after all federal land," spokesman Wade Willis said in an e-mail. "This is an extreme response to what has

never been more than an arbitrary target with no scientific backing. There is no biological emergency to justify this kind of action."

Fish and Game communications director Jennifer Yuhas fired back. The land subject to the [predator control](#) effort is state land - not a preserve, she wrote in an e-mail of her own. "The preserve has a boundary for a reason."

"It's quite sad that these groups have ignored the modifications that have scaled our (predator control) programs back and chosen these simplistic emotional arguments with no basis in order to see their names in the media," she wrote.

For now, the state plans to spend about \$100,000 on the new helicopter program, James said.

The Park Service has a radio collar on at least one wolf in each of five different packs that routinely venture from the national preserve into the area where helicopters are gunning for predators this week, Cooper said.

The state says it will leave three of those packs alone altogether and will avoid shooting wolves with collars in the others. The state uses spotters in planes to find the wolves.

The Park Service also asked the state to create a buffer zone around the national preserve where no wolves would be killed. According to the Park Service, the state refused, saying the Fortymile caribou herd's calving grounds - which is where the state is focusing its predator control efforts - overlaps with the proposed no-kill zone.

There are roughly 400 wolves in the region, James said. Using the helicopter program, plus private fixed-wing pilots, hunters and trappers, the state's goal is to kill all but about 100.

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