

California lawmakers take aim at Alaska's aerial wolf hunts

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Alaska's predator-control program to kill wolves, which drew renewed national scrutiny last year during former Gov. Sarah Palin's bid for vice president, is under attack again in Congress.

Two [California](#) Democrats in Congress have introduced legislation that would all but ban the practice of shooting wolves from airplanes to control their numbers. The legislation, introduced by Sen. Dianne Feinstein and Rep. George Miller, would force [Alaska](#) game officials to declare a biological emergency that predicts the imminent collapse of a species without the program.

Even if the state could demonstrate such an emergency, the law would limit aerial hunting to state or federal wildlife employees, barring private contractors, which currently are allowed to kill wolves from fixed-wing airplanes.

"What this bill does is essentially makes it impossible for Alaska to manage [wolf populations](#) in any sort of responsible way," said Pat Valkenburg, the deputy commissioner of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game. "We finally have a program that works, and to end it because of the emotional feelings of uninformed people is just not a good idea."

Alaska's Board of Game renewed its aerial predator-control effort seven years ago after complaints from hunters that a healthy wolf population was preventing moose and caribou populations from recovering in some areas, including parts of the state where subsistence hunters depend on

game for food. Six areas in Alaska -- about 10 percent of the state -- have predator control programs for wolves.

Alaskans have twice voted to ban such hunting, but the state Legislature has overturned those bans both times. Last year, voters turned down a ballot measure that would have severely restricted the aerial hunting program.

The state's aerial program, long the target of the conservation group Defenders of Wildlife, drew renewed attention last year during Palin's bid for vice president. The governor even mentioned it during her farewell speech, in which she criticized "starlets" such as actress Ashley Judd for lending their fame earlier this year to the movement opposing aerial hunting.

In her resignation speech July 26, Palin told fellow Alaskans to "stick together" in opposing "outside special interest groups," including Defenders of Wildlife and Judd, who appeared in a video decrying aerial hunting.

"Because you're going to see anti-hunting, anti-2nd Amendment circuses from Hollywood," Palin said in her farewell address. "And here's how they do it. They use these delicate, tiny, very talented celebrity starlets. They use Alaska as a fundraising tool for their anti-2nd Amendment causes."

"And by the way," Palin added, "Hollywood needs to know: We eat, therefore we hunt."

In the past, Defenders of Wildlife used its political-action arm to run political ads in Alaska targeting Republican U.S. Rep. Don Young for his record on environmental and renewable-energy issues. Earlier this year, it launched a campaign called Eye on Palin. The campaign Web

site, stocked with photos of Palin, included a count of the number of wolves killed in the state's aerial program and another page for donations.

"It is true that Ashley Judd has expressed concern over the aerial gunning of wolves in Alaska," said Robert Dewey, the vice president for government relations at Defenders of Wildlife. "But she's not alone. There are many other voices."

Conservationists say that Palin's turn as the Republican vice-presidential nominee may have helped draw attention to aerial hunting in a way unmatched by the "starlets" she criticized.

"There's no question that Palin's selection for the Republicans elevated the issue to a higher national plane than ever before," said Wayne Pacelle, the president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States.

"It cuts both ways," Pacelle added. "It makes it easy for Democrats to support our efforts. But it may taint our efforts with Republicans, because they may consider it a partisan issue. But it's never been a partisan issue. She didn't invent the issue. It's been a troubling aspect of Alaska's wildlife policy for many years."

Alaska's predator-control program long has been a controversial method of managing wildlife, said Ted Williams, a Massachusetts-based outdoors writer who wrote about the Palin administration's approach to predator control in the most recent issue of Audubon Magazine. Williams recalls a 1993 [wolf](#) summit at which former Alaska Gov. Wally Hickel said, memorably, "You can't let nature just run wild."

"It has definitely flared up on the national stage before," Williams said. "But Palin has placed it there in a significant way. In a way it's good she

attracted national attention to the predator issues with some of her absurd statements."

Williams, himself a hunter, characterized the state's program as a "war on predators" that treats caribou and moose as livestock, not wildlife.

"If you don't shoot a moose out of your truck window in Fairbanks, it's fun to blame it on the wolves," he said.

"No one's trying to eliminate wolves," countered Ted Spraker, the vice chairman of the Alaska Board of Game. "That's as far from the truth as you can imagine. But in some areas and some isolated cases, we have a lot of wolves, and a lot of bears, and not a lot of moose, and a lot of people who depend on moose. It's especially important to subsistence people, who live a subsistence lifestyle."

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