

# Wolf sterilization may be used to boost caribou herd

by Brian O'Donoghue  
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A joint Alaska-Yukon planning team, in what's described as an "apology to the caribou... for the role humans played in its decline," is calling for new harvest quotas and wolf-sterilization to promote the recovery of the once vast Fortymile Caribou herd.

"Because wolves reproduce so rapidly, fertility control is particularly pertinent," noted the draft report of the Fortymile Caribou Herd Recovery Plan, "and we recommend it be investigated as a means of reducing wolf predation."

The team's wolf sterilization endorsement represents a hard-fought compromise, said Bud Burris, who represented the Alaska Outdoor Council on the 20-member planning team.

"It was difficult from my standpoint," said Burris, an avid hunter and advocate of aerial shooting of wolves. "Obviously it's not the most efficient way to manage predators. The team supported sterilization as a compromise between efficiency and what's acceptable to a majority of Alaskans."

Since June 1994, affected agencies, groups and residents from the upper Tanana and Fortymile rivers in Alaska, and the Dawson City area of the Yukon, have participated in a citizen team dedicated to expanding the Fortymile herd. The caribou once numbered an estimated 586,000, but the herd has fallen to just 20,000. The draft recovery plan — which will be discussed in a series of Alaska-Yukon town meetings later this month — emerged from that process.

The team's non-binding recommendations are introduced with a quote from Alex Van Bibber, a Yukon Native elder. "We have abused both the herd and the land. The land is waiting for an apology." The draft plan, which calls for cutting annual herd harvests from 450 to 150 bulls, is presented as a response to the elder's wish.

While hunting is addressed, calf mortality is targeted as the biggest limiting factor on the Fortymile Herd's continued growth. "Of the more than 8,000 calves born in 1994, an estimated 5,000 were killed by predators within a year," the draft states. Calves more than 2 weeks old seldom fall prey to grizzly bears, the team's researchers found, and their overall mortality fell to about 12 percent after five months of life. "After two weeks the calves are mobile enough to escape most bears, but are still vulnerable to wolves. Therefore, by lowering wolf numbers on the summer range, more calves could survive."

The planning team, which included groups as diverse as Dawson First Nation, the Alaska Outdoors Council and the North-

ern Alaska Environmental Center, clashed over possible approaches to the predator issue, said mediator Susan Todd.

"The toughest issue was what to do about wolf predators, because they seem to be the primary factor reducing calf survival," said Todd, who has an \$8,000 contract to produce the draft recovery plan.

The team's preferred alternative calls for a five-year program reducing wolves in the herd's summer range, which is located west of the Alaska-Yukon border between the Steese and Alaska highways. This is to be accomplished by encouraging trappers to work this area, where few harvest now take place. The team also recommends removing 30-40 wolves and practicing "experimental non-lethal fertility control" on an additional 30 adult males and possi-

bly 15 adult females, sterilizing up to 45 wolves in 10 packs total.

Sterilization has been used on six wolf packs in Minnesota and one pack in the Yukon, Todd said, noting that a similar technique has been successfully applied to control foxes in Australia. The draft plan provides few details about the sterilization methods to be applied: "Before a decision is made to use surgery or any other method, additional research is needed to determine which non-lethal method involves the least human intrusion."

The expense of the as-yet-undefined sterilizations is estimated at about \$800 per wolf, as compared with the approximate \$1,000-a-wolf cost of shooting wolves from a helicopter. Those cost estimates came from the state, said the Outdoor Council's Burris,

who remains convinced that aerial predator control will prove to be more cost-efficient.

The team rejected an alternative plan based on airborne wolf control efforts, noting that it could produce "high probability of a boycott," and costs inflated by the need to respond to "substantial public inquiries about the program."

The team's final decision in favor of experimental sterilization caused on group, the Alaska Wildlife Alliance, to reject the compromise plan. "We disagree with the plan's premise that the herd must be increased, and that predators should be controlled to do so," the alliance stated in a formal minority opinion. "We are concerned

about the plan's reliance on non-lethal wolf control. This still intensive management aimed solely at inflating the herd for human use."

Burris fears that uncompromising attitude could undermine the team's goal of restoring the once-mighty herd to its former glory. "We've probably failed at both ends," he said. "It's probably not going to get acceptance from (wildlife preservationists), and it's not going to satisfy serious sportsmen who'd like to get the herd built back up in the shortest time possible."

On this side of the border, the hearing schedule of the draft Fortymile Caribou recovery Plan

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## ... Wolf sterilization being considered

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starts Thursday in Eagle, followed by Delta, Sept. 18, 7 p.m.; Fairbanks, Sept. 19, 7 p.m., at Noel Wien Library; Anchorage, Sept. 21; and Tok, Sept. 25.

At its height, biologist Olaus Murie placed the size of the Fortymile herd at 586,000 cari-

bou, with a far-roaming range of 85,000 square miles between Fort Yukon and Whitehorse. His population estimate was based on the herd's 20-day migration across the Steese Highway in 1920. As late as 1963, the herd still numbered about 50,000 caribou, but then entered a rapid decline under pres-

sure from over-harvesting, harsh weather and increasing numbers of wolves. As the herd's size plummeted, falling to about 6,400 by 1975, its range also contracted, and the Fortymile caribou withdrew from most of the Yukon Territory and ceased migrating as far north as the Steese.

Assisted by new harvest restrictions and favorable weather, the herd began rebounding in the 1980s, climbing to 15,000 in 1986, then leveling off at about 22,000 in the 1990s.