

Predator Control

Alaska's current predator control programs are clearly not based on sound biological science, nor is there any requirement that sound science must provide the basis for designing, implementing, and monitoring predator control. Furthermore, within Alaska, there is no general agreement among hunters, wildlife biologists, and policy makers as to what constitutes sound science. As a result, the current programs are based mainly on political science and are strongly endorsed by the governor who vows to continue them.

On January 6, 2005 a letter of concern signed by 124 biologists from the U.S. and Canada was sent to governor Frank Murkowski. It noted that the new programs depart from past efforts to utilize planning teams, prepare peer-reviewed study plans, and gather missing data. Past efforts followed standards and guidelines recommended by a National Research Council (NRC) review. The letter urged the governor to return to sound design and monitoring of control programs by using key standards including conducting control as adaptive management, monitoring control so as to determine its effectiveness or lack thereof, avoiding programs with a low probability of success, and re-examining inflated ungulate population objectives often based on historical highs.

The letter expressed particular concern about Alaska's intensive management statute. Its implementation has resulted in chasing unattainable ungulate population objectives with poorly designed predator control programs that may risk long-term sustainability of ungulates, protection of ungulate habitat integrity, and viability of predator populations.

The dangers of this approach, as opposed to science-based programs, were illustrated at McGrath. Early in the McGrath debate attention was focused almost entirely on reducing wolves. After a planning team recommended examining bear predation, a bear translocation program resulted in greatly increased moose calf survival. Bears were much more important predators on young moose calves than were wolves. The team also recommended examining moose habitat quality. Preliminary results indicated vast areas of marginal moose habitat that would not support many moose even in the total absence of predators.

But most importantly, the team called for better moose census data. A properly designed aerial census done under good conditions in autumn 2001 revealed about four times the number of moose estimated only one year previously. In fact, the better census indicated that the moose population objective in that area had already been met without wolf reduction, and moose were not nearly as scarce as some local residents had claimed.