




Wildlife

As Western Arctic and Teshekpuk caribou herds decline, comments sought on management plans

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Hunters and stakeholders of the Western Arctic and Teshekpuk caribou herds are encouraged to speak up, and soon.

The public comment period on Proposal 202 to the state's Board of Game closes on Feb. 27.

Both herds are in steady decline and harvest reductions are on the horizon, at least until the caribou start to rebound.

The Western Arctic herd peaked in 2003 at 490,000 animals but a number of factors have contributed to its drop since then including changes in habitat, weather and climate, predation, hunting and disease. As of late, upon inspection by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the caribou look healthy with no signs of disease, parasites or starvation.

The Teshekpuk herd, which shares grounds with the Western Arctic herd, peaked in 2008 at 68,000. Both groups have declined by more than half at last count, leaving the Western Arctic herd at around 235,000 and the Teshekpuk at 32,000 at last count.

Studies by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game show that calf survival has been on a 20-year decline while cow mortality rates have gone up.

The effort to mitigate the long-term impacts of a lessening herd may include restricted seasons, reduced bag limits, and sex-specific hunts. The Board of Game is meeting in March to discuss actions that would help conserve the herds, including Proposal 202, according to a release from Fish and Game.

"The Board will also begin examining Intensive Management options as well as other ideas and is looking for your input," it read.

Within Proposal 202 is the pitch to stop the harvest of calves for both herds in the entire range. Along with that are the suggestions to reduce the non-resident bag limit for bulls throughout the Western Arctic herd and Teshekpuk caribou herd ranges, close the non-resident cow harvest, close the same-day airborne caribou

hunt in Game Management Unit 22, and reduce overall harvest of the Teshekpuk herd, especially of cows, by changing seasons and bag limits in northern Game Management Unit 26A for both residents and non-residents.

The public can comment directly to the Board of Game immediately at the [Fish and Game website](#) or by attending local advisory committee meetings or the Board of Game meeting March 13-17 at the University of Alaska Student Union in Anchorage.

Caribou herd numbers go up and down over the years and decades, but management groups, like the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group, have since been formed to help manage the herd in a more cooperative way.

As for hunters in the region, who rely on caribou as a staple in their diet, most are in agreement with proposed restrictions because they know the future of the herd depends on present-day conservation, said Meghan Nedwick, who works in outreach and education for Fish and Game in Kotzebue.

"There certainly doesn't seem to be outrage in that respect at all," she said. Locals are more comfortable setting their own boundaries as far as harvest restrictions instead of waiting for a regulatory body to tell them what they can or cannot do, she added.

"It's really important for people and that's why we want to get the word out about the regulation changes that are being proposed."

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