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State Asks Federal Subsistence Board to Reconsider GMU 23 Caribou Hunting Closure

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Sam Cotten, Commissioner

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State Asks Federal Subsistence Board to Reconsider GMU 23 Caribou Hunting Closure

(Juneau) — The Alaska Department of Fish and Game has asked the Federal Subsistence Board to reconsider a decision restricting caribou hunting on federal public lands in Game Management Unit 23. Wildlife Special Action 16-01, approved by the board on April 18 and scheduled to go into effect July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017, closes caribou hunting on federal lands to all but federally qualified subsistence users. Federal lands comprise most of GMU 23.

The board based its decision on testimony that the Western Arctic caribou herd, which migrates through GMU 23, was declining and that subsistence uses required protection. The closure was described as a measure to be imposed until updated population estimates could be obtained. The department works to count the herd every two years, but the 2015 census was hampered by wildfire smoke, weather, and unusual caribou movement patterns.

In a letter dated May 25, 2016, Commissioner Sam Cotten requested the board reconsider the closure because it is not consistent with management strategies recommended in the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Cooperative Management Plan. The plan, which is endorsed by the federal board, was written by the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group, a cooperative body of subsistence hunters from rural villages, sport hunters, conservationists, hunting guides, reindeer herders, and hunter transporters who meet regularly to reach consensus on recommendations for herd research, monitoring, regulation and allocation. Cotten said deviating from the plan undermines the group's efforts to resolve complex management issues.

Cotten also provided new information from the department concerning population status of the Western Arctic caribou herd. An initial estimate of 200,000–235,000 animals provided by department biologists who testified before the board in April has since been revised to 206,000. The updated information is based primarily on data that indicates that animals were in particularly robust health and calf recruitment and adult female survival rates had improved. Modeling suggests the herd has stabilized or declined only slightly. Data on improved body condition of caribou collected last fall at Onion Portage is in agreement with testimony on body condition observed by hunters throughout the range of the herd.

The Western Arctic caribou herd has a history of rapid fluctuations which can result from variations in weather, habitat, disease, predation and other factors. In 1970 the herd numbered about 242,000 caribou, declining to about 75,000 by 1976. From 1976 to 2003 it grew, peaking at 490,000 caribou. The herd subsequently declined to 325,000 in 2011 and to 235,000 in 2013.

The Western Arctic Caribou Herd Cooperative Management Plan recommends the herd be managed for a “conservative” harvest of 14,000 to 18,550 animals when numbers range between 200,000 and 265,000. Under the plan, hunting restrictions such as those imposed by the Federal Subsistence Board in April would not be considered until herd estimates fall between 130,000 and 200,000. The board has in the past agreed to respect the recommendations contained in the management plan.

For more information, visit <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=plans.wahplan>, or contact Division of Wildlife Conservation Assistant Director Lem Butler at (907) 861-2105.

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