

December 27, 2015

Fish and Wildlife Branch
Ministry of Forests, Lands, and Natural Resource Operations
PO Box 9391, Stn Prov Gov
VIA EMAIL: FishandWildlife@gov.bc.ca

RE: The Proposed Changes to British Columbia's Regulations on the Wolf Hunt;
PN #2124

Animal Justice Canada Legislative Fund (“**Animal Justice**”) is a Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to enhancing legal protections for animals. The organization is comprised of lawyers, law professors and law students that seek to use the law and legal skills to protect animals.

Animal Justice appreciates this opportunity to provide comments regarding the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Nature Resource Operations (“**MFLN**”) proposed changes to the regulations under the *Wildlife Act*, RSBC 1996, c 488 (“**WA**”).

Regulation Changes

As you are aware, the proposed amendments to the *WA* are as follows:

- a) Amend BC Hunting Regulation 190/84 to remove closed seasons on wolves in Wildlife Management Units 7-19 to 7-22, 7-31 to 7-36, 7-42 to 7-58.
- b) Amend BC Hunting Regulation 190/84 to remove bag limits on wolves in Wildlife Management Units 7-19 to 7-22, 7-31 to 7-36, 7-42 to 7-58.

Provided Justification

Over the course of the last few decades, the population of the Southern Mountain Caribou in British Columbia has dwindled. In 2002, the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada classified the Southern Mountain Caribou as ‘threatened’, and in May 2014, the Committee reclassified the Southern Mountain Caribou as ‘endangered’. The BC government has spent decades instituting various predator-management programs aimed at protecting caribou by controlling the wolf population with little discernible success. Earlier this year, the BC government attracted widespread criticism when it announced its decision to reintroduce the aerial wolf cull, a measure previously introduced in the 1980s before being abandoned due to popular protest. This year, the

aerial cull has killed a total of 84 wolves in the South Selkirk and South Peace regions. The program is to remain in force for another four years.

The proposed amendments to BC Hunting Regulation 190/84 are justified as being part of the BC government's broader predator management strategy in northeastern BC intended to respond to negative impacts on wild ungulates as well as cattle. The proposal claims that wolves are an "abundant predator species" that could sustain increased hunting.

Commentary

Animal Justice submits that the proposed amendments are an ineffective way of addressing declining populations of wild ungulates such as the caribou, as well as being an ineffective way of dealing with cattle depredation. Animal Justice also submits that animal welfare is a consideration that must be taken into consideration.

Alleged Ungulate-Wolf Conflict

The decline of the caribou population is primarily caused by habitat destruction. The destruction of old forests which caribou are dependent on has severely impacted the caribou population and its ability to recover. Additionally, the fragmentation of caribou habitat caused by the destruction of forests and industrial development (such as roads) has exposed caribou to increased predation. Though wolves do prey on caribou, other predator species such as grizzly bears and cougars also prey on caribou and may be responsible for more caribou deaths than wolves.¹ Indeed, increased lethal control of wolves may simply led to their role being taken on by another predator species in the area, or "immigrating" wolves from other regions.

Repeated attempts by the BC government to increase caribou populations by controlling wolf populations such as the wolf sterilization experiments of the 2000s have proven ineffective as stated in the BC Wolf Management Plan.² Similarly, a review of Alberta's 2014 wolf cull concluded that the program failed to show any improvements in the survival of Boreal Woodland Caribou.³ Indeed, Ministry of Environment documents suggest the government is aware of these issues; the documents emphasizes that wolf control is an "experimental program" that may not lead to increased numbers of caribou, and stresses the importance of habitat recovery, concluding that "as long as the habitat conditions on and adjacent to caribou ranges remain heavily modified by industrial activities, it is unlikely that any self-sustaining caribou populations will be able to exist in

¹ Trevor Kinley and Clayton Apps, "Population Status and Mortality of Mountain Caribou in the Southern Purcell Mountains, British Columbia" in L M Darling, ed, *Proceedings of a Conference on the Biology and Management of Species and Habitats at Risk Kamloops, BC, 15-19 February 1999* (Victoria: British Columbia Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks, 2000) 655-662.

² BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, *Management Plan for the Grey Wolf (Canis lupus) in British Columbia* (Victoria: BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, 2014) at 17.

³ D Hervieux et al, "Managing wolves (*Canis lupus*) to recover threatened woodland caribou (*Rangifer tarandus caribou*) in Alberta" (2014) 92 *Can J Zool* 1029-1037.

the South Peace [region].”⁴ Thus, the decline in caribou numbers cannot be effectively addressed through the liberalization of the wolf hunt and framing the issue as one of wolves versus caribou. Furthermore, the same report finds that “[t]he efficacy of wolf reduction using enhanced trapping and hunting is unproven.”⁵

Alleged Threat to Cattle

The government provides no reliable evidence to suggest that wolves presently pose a significant or increased threat to cattle in northeastern British Columbia. Indeed, the BC government’s most recent report on wolves in the province, the BC Wolf Management Plan is uncertain as to the number of wolves in BC; it states that the province’s “best estimate” of the current wolf population is 8,500, but that the population could range anywhere from 5,300 to 11,600.⁶ Similarly, the true number of livestock lost to wolf predation is unknown and estimates vary widely.⁷ However, the statistics available do not seem to merit alarm; in 2010-2011, the Ministry of Agriculture reported 133 verified losses of cattle to predation from all large predators (not only wolves, but also bears, cougars and coyotes), making up an insignificant percentage of cattle deaths in BC.⁸ Studies conducted by the American Department of Agriculture have confirmed that livestock predation generally counts for a small percentage (just over 4%) of cattle fatalities.⁹

Furthermore, research indicates that increased lethal control will not solve the problem of livestock predation. Studies indicate that increased lethal control destabilizes pack structure, leading to a rise in the number of sexually mature wolves breeding, and a resultant increase in the number of attacks sustained on cattle.¹⁰ In the same vein, given that hunters tend to shoot young wolves as opposed to mature breeding wolves, increased hunting may result in the growth of the wolf population due to lesser competition, and

⁴ Ministry of Environment, *Experimental Wolf Reduction to Enhance the Recovery of Threatened Caribou Herds in the South Peace* (Ministry of the Environment, 2014) at 4-5, online: <http://docs.openinfo.gov.bc.ca/Response_Package_FNR-2015-50572.pdf>.

⁵ *Ibid.*, at 2.

⁶ BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, *supra*, note 2 at 6.

⁷ Stephen Hume, "Livestock statistics don't justify wolf cull", *Vancouver Sun* (10 October 2012), online:

⁸ Larry Pynn, "B.C. wolf management plan criticized as veiled attack on the species", *Vancouver Sun* (16 November 2015), online:

<http://www.vancouversun.com/technology/Provincial+wolf+management+plan+criticized+veiled+attack/7562497/story.html?__lsa=a3a0-54d0>; Larry Pynn, "'Verified' livestock losses in decline as province adopts open-season policy on wolves", *Vancouver Sun* (18 August 2011), online:

<<http://www.raincoast.org/2011/08/verified-livestock-losses-in-decline-as-province-adopts-open-season-policy-on-wolves/>>.

⁹ National Agricultural Statistics Services, *Cattle Death Loss* (United States Department of Agriculture, 2011), online: <<http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/usda/nass/CattDeath//2010s/2011/CattDeath-05-12-2011.pdf>> at 5.

¹⁰ RB Wielgus and KA Peebles, "Effects of Wolf Mortality on Livestock Depredations" (2014) 9:12 *PLoS ONE* e113505.

thus, more attacks on cattle.¹¹ Indeed, one study indicates that increased lethal control leads wolves to spread into new territories, creating new areas of human-wolf conflict.¹²

Wolf Interests

The proposed amendments justify the liberalization of the wolf hunt by anecdotal evidence suggesting that the number of wolves in BC is increasing. However, as stated above, the BC Wolf Management Plan concedes that the approximate number of wolves in British Columbia is a very rough estimate. The plan also states that there is “considerable uncertainty in the current take of wolves by resident hunters and trappers as BC does not have a mandatory reporting system”, that the “total harvests could be substantially higher” than the estimates and that “[w]ithout more reliable estimates of the harvest, it is difficult to assess the sustainability of BC’s wolf harvest.”¹³ It seems ill-advised to open up the wolf hunt when a government report notes that the impact of current, relatively restricted hunting practices on wolf populations is unknown.

Moreover, wolves are pack animals with complex social relations. Killing members of a pack disrupts pack cohesion and impedes social learning, causing group instability and creating changes in breeding patterns (as outlined previously). A recent study of wolf populations across Canada has shown that wolves from areas where they are heavily hunted have higher levels of stress hormones, potentially leading to changes in the health and behaviours of both these individuals and their offspring, including changes in reproductive rates.¹⁴ As wolves are a ‘keystone species’, these changes would likely majorly impact the ecosystem and in ways that are difficult to predict and therefore manage.

Conclusion

Given that the liberalization of hunting policies on wolves will fail to address declining ungulate populations, livestock depredation, and will also create animal welfare concerns, Animal Justice recommends alternative strategies be utilized. Conservation of declining ungulate populations may be improved by focusing on the primary cause of endangerment – habitat destruction due to human activities such as logging. Protected zones, off limit to human industry and activities and buffer zones should be established to ensure that the caribou population is given the greatest opportunity to recover. Alternative strategies may also be used for the protection of cattle. Livestock owners can manage the threat posed by wolves and other predators by non-lethal measures such as: having a strong human presence, using a guard dog and quickly removing dead livestock. Long-term protection for critical ungulate habitat and employing nonlethal measures to guard

¹¹ Dennis L Murray, "Death from anthropogenic causes is partially compensatory in recovering wolf populations" (2010) 143:11 *Biological Conservation* 2514-2524.

¹² Scott M Brainerd, "The Effects of Breeder Loss on Wolves" (2008) 72:1 *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 89-98.

¹³ BC Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, *supra*, note 2 at 13.

¹⁴ Heather M Bryan et al, "Heavily hunted wolves have higher stress and reproductive steroids than wolves with lower hunting pressure" (2015) 29:3 *Functional Ecology* 347-356.

against livestock depredation will allow ungulate populations to increase and cattle to be protected through non-violent means that demonstrate respect for the life and dignity of all animals in British Columbia.

Animal Justice appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed changes and hopes that the MFLN will take the concerns highlighted in this submission into consideration in respect of the proposed changes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "C. Labchuk". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Camille Labchuk, BA, JD
Executive Director
Animal Justice