

# Defenders of Wildlife

## Protect America's Wildlife (PAW) Act



### Aerial Hunting FAQs

In 1971 Congress passed the Airborne Hunting Act (AHA) to prohibit private citizens from engaging in the inhumane and unethical practice of shooting animals from planes. But, for more than 35 years, the state of Alaska has attempted to circumvent the intent of the AHA. The state's actions violate the intent and purpose of the law and there is concern that other states may soon follow Alaska's lead. Below are answers to Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about aerial hunting.

- 1. What is aerial hunting?** Aerial hunting occurs when hunters use airplanes to track an animal in the snow, chase them to exhaustion and shoot them from the air, or land the aircraft and shoot them from the ground, a practice known as "land and shoot." The use of aircraft to shoot or harass animals from the air was made illegal in 1971 when Congress passed the AHA.
- 2. Why did Congress make aerial hunting illegal?** The practice is unethical and barbaric. By using a plane to harass an animal to exhaustion in winter where there is no cover and no opportunity for the animal to escape, aerial hunting violates the ethical hunting standard of fair chase. In addition, because planes provide an unsteady moving base for shooters, aerial hunting rarely results in a clean kill. Instead, the animal dies a brutal and unnecessarily cruel death often writhing in pain from non-fatal shots while the pilot circles back to give the gunner additional chances to kill the animal. The unethical and brutal reality of this practice was brought to the public's attention in 1969 when NBC aired a documentary that showed an aerial wolf hunt in Alaska. The documentary generated a national outcry and Congress responded by outlawing the practice.
- 3. Is Alaska's program "aerial hunting" or "wildlife management"?** The circumstances surrounding Alaska's program make it clear that the state's program is hunting and not legitimate wildlife management. A legitimate wildlife management program would be based on sound science. Alaska's programs lack even the most basic scientific information such as regional population censuses for the moose, caribou, wolf and bear populations. Instead, wolf populations are largely based on reports from hunters. In addition, the state chooses to use private hunters and private pilots to do the shooting rather than using Alaska Department of Fish and Game personnel who have the skills, knowledge and tools necessary to conduct the program humanely and efficiently. Some of the participants are the very same people who engaged in aerial hunting privately before the AHA banned the practice. And, the hunters are allowed to keep the pelts as trophies or sell them for profit instead of turning them over to wildlife officials. The hunters fly their own planes, pay for their own fuel and hunt when they choose to.
- 4. Why would states circumvent the intent of the AHA?** Some states, like Alaska, are attempting to suppress predator populations and artificially inflate game populations. Alaska is strongly influenced by powerful hunting groups more interested in trophy hunting than the long term health of the ecosystem or the long-term well-being of the game species.
- 5. What about subsistence hunters?** Subsistence hunters rely on wild game as a primary source of protein. They depend on healthy robust game populations for their survival – a condition enhanced by the presence of a healthy predator population. Unfortunately, the state of Alaska has tried to hijack this traditional lifestyle as an excuse for eliminating the very predators that help maintain healthy robust game populations. At the same time, the state sells permits for moose and caribou to urban and out of state hunters who not only compete directly

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with subsistence hunters in the thousands but who also weaken the game populations that subsistence hunters rely on by targeting and killing the strongest, healthiest specimen they can find. Don't be fooled. Aerial hunting is not about protecting subsistence hunters. It is also important to note that if game populations were legitimately at risk of declining based on scientific evidence, the PAW Act includes a provision to allow the state to take action to protect the species and ultimately the people who depend on them for subsistence.

**6. Are wolf and bear populations threatening moose and caribou populations in Alaska?** No. There are more than one million caribou in Alaska in areas as far north as the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and as far south as the Aleutian Islands. State biologists estimate moose populations to be greater than 160,000, more than twice the number of moose found in the rest of the United States. And, in fact, wolves and bears play an important role in maintaining healthy game populations, as they have done for thousands of years. Wolves and bears cull the weakest and sickest and over time improve the health of the game species. An unscientific predator elimination program is likely to pose a much greater threat to the long term health and survival of game populations than natural predators like wolves and bears. Science has documented that artificially boosting game populations, as the state of Alaska is attempting to do through predator control, could result in habitat destruction by moose and caribou, and ultimately, a crash in these populations.

**7. How many wolves and bears have been killed by aerial hunting in Alaska?** Each winter, since 2003, the state issues hundreds of permits to aerial gunning teams made up of a hunter and a pilot. They are currently authorized to kill wolves in 5 areas of the state totaling more than 63,000 square miles – larger than the state of Wisconsin. Since 2003, more than 1,000 wolves have been killed by aerial hunters. During the winter of 2003-2004, 147 wolves were killed. During the 2004-2005 season, 275 wolves were killed. During 2005-2006, 152 wolves were killed. During 2006-2007, 97 wolves were killed. During 2007-2008, 124 wolves were killed. This season, more than 200 wolves have been killed. Through aerial hunting, as well as ground-based trapping and hunting, the state aims to remove more than 600 wolves this winter in the five control areas, and aims to reduce wolf populations by up to 80 percent in some areas. While we do not have specific data on the number of bears that have been killed, same-day airborne hunting of black and brown bears has been approved by the Alaska Board of Game allowing hunters to fly in and shoot bears at bait stations in certain areas of the state totaling more than 12,000 square miles.

**8. Does similar aerial hunting occur in other states?** Alaska's aerial hunting program is unique among states where large predators such as grizzly bears, mountain lions, wolves and black bears still roam. However, encouraged by Alaska's example, several states, mostly those with growing populations of gray wolves in the lower 48 states, have announced plans to use aerial hunting to dramatically reduce or in some cases eliminate wolf packs once they are removed from the endangered species list in order to boost game populations. Wyoming's plan called for "aggressive" techniques including "aerial hunting and hazing" of wolves. Idaho's governor, C.L. "Butch" Otter, has publicly announced he wants to kill more than 80 percent of the state's wolves, and the state has stated its intent to control wolves to increase game populations as Alaska is doing.

**9. What would the Protect America's Wildlife (PAW) Act do?** The PAW Act is narrowly crafted legislation that would close a loophole in the existing Airborne Hunting Act that Alaska legislators and officials are exploiting. This same loophole that could be exploited by other states to hunt wolves and other animals from the air, under the guise of wildlife management. The bill would clarify the conditions under which states can use aircraft to aid in the management of wildlife, bar states from using aerial hunting to artificially boost game species populations that are not at risk, and clarifies the prohibition on harassing animals from planes – part of the inhumane "land and shoot" hunting that Alaska has also allowed to occur.

**10. What about the state's right to manage wildlife?** The PAW Act acknowledges the right of states to manage wildlife. In fact the Act explicitly provides that state wildlife agencies may use planes to proactively respond to legitimate biological emergencies in wildlife populations, including game populations. In addition, the Act makes it clear that states can continue to use aircraft for animal control where land, livestock, water, pets, crops, or human health and safety are at risk.

**11. Who else opposes aerial hunting besides Defenders of Wildlife?** Many hunters in Alaska oppose the practice because it violates the standards of fair chase and they believe the state's programs are scientifically indefensible. A number of former members of the Alaska Board of Game also oppose the practice for the same reasons and have voiced their support for the Protect America's Wildlife Act. Scientific societies, including the American Society of Mammalogists, and hundreds of independent scientists, including those who work or have worked in Alaska, oppose the practice. Alaskans themselves have voted two out of three times to restrict the practice.