

Predator plan records first kills

WOLVES: Nelchina hunting teams are off to a slow start with only 14 of 140 bagged; protests to intensify.

By MARY PEMBERTON
The Associated Press

(Published: January 31, 2004)

Fourteen wolves have been killed so far in a state-sponsored predator control program that has prompted demonstrations nationwide and a call for a tourism boycott of Alaska.

The wolves were killed earlier this month in the Nelchina basin area about 100 miles northeast of Anchorage, where state wildlife officials say the moose population has plummeted because wolves and bears are killing too many moose calves, leaving locals with too few moose to eat.

The program actually is off to a slow start, Bruce Bartley, a spokesman for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, said Friday. No fresh snow and blowing snow in the area has made the wolves difficult to track. Temperatures in recent days plummeted to 40 and 50 degrees below zero, leaving hunter and pilot teams mostly grounded, he said.

"I don't think that is hugely successful," Bartley said.

The state this month issued permits to 28 teams to remove 140 wolves from an approximately 8,000-square-mile area. The Nelchina plan requires pilots to land the planes before the animals are shot.

Another wolf-control program near the Interior town of McGrath, where three teams were issued one-month permits, allows for the animals to be shot from planes in the air. So far, no wolves in the McGrath area have been killed, largely because of unfavorable weather conditions. The goal there is to remove about 40 wolves from a 1,700-square-mile area.

Conditions for tracking wolves should improve in February and March, particularly near McGrath, Fish and Game has said.

The Nelchina wolves were killed by six hunter and pilot teams. They will be allowed to sell the wolf hides if they want, after the hides are turned in and plastic tags affixed, Bartley said.

"It makes me cringe," said Priscilla Feral, president of the 200,000-member Friends of Animals, when told Friday that the first wolves had been killed under the program.

The Darien, Conn.-based group is organizing what it calls "howl-ins" in cities nationwide to try to stop the lethal wolf-control program.

More than 50 protests so far have been held in cities across the nation, Feral said. Two more are scheduled this Sunday in Washington, D.C., and in Burke, Va., to coincide with Super Bowl football parties. One will be held Feb. 24 -- Mardi Gras -- in New Orleans.

Gov. Frank Murkowski has promised not to bend under the pressure of animal welfare groups and their call to boycott Alaska's estimated \$2 billion tourism industry. He maintains that the state has an obligation to manage its resources to benefit Alaskans.

Now that wolves are actually being killed under the program, the governor can expect the protests to intensify, Feral said.

"I'm disgusted, but it will galvanize people to work harder," she said. "What does it take, an avalanche to move the immovable Frank Murkowski? But the heat will turn up."

Friends of Animals was behind a nationwide protest and tourism boycott a decade ago that resulted in then-Gov. Wally Hickel ordering a moratorium on a similar program.

Alaska voters in 1996 and 2000 voted to ban aerial killing of wolves. Murkowski signed a bill last June overturning the most recent ban.

"It gives a black eye to hunting traditions and values and creates an image of Alaska that is anything but welcoming to nonhunters," Defenders of Wildlife president Rodger Schlickeisen said.

WOLF CONTROL information is available online through the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Defenders of Wildlife and Friends of Animals.

www.adn.com/links