



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY ALASKA CHAPTER

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The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society is a professional society founded in 1971. With over 200 members, the Alaska Chapter is one of the largest chapters of The Wildlife Society, an international organization representing wildlife biologists and managers employed by state, federal, and borough resource agencies, academic institutions, non-governmental conservation organizations, and private industry. Our mission is to enhance the ability of wildlife professionals to conserve biological diversity, sustain productivity, and ensure responsible use of wildlife resources in Alaska for the benefit of society.

March 30, 2010

Re: House Bill 267 (snowmachine access in Dalton Highway corridor)

Dear Members of the House Resources Committee:

The Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society strongly encourages you to consider the potential detrimental impacts of HB 267 to wildlife. If HB 267 is passed there is likely to be a substantial increase in snowmachine use in open terrain far beyond the corridor.

HB 267 would remove restrictions, which have existed since the early 1970s, to snowmachine use originating within a 5-mile corridor each side of the 414-mile long Dalton Highway during 1 October to 30 April. Hunting by use of snowmachines is currently prohibited within and beyond the Dalton Highway Corridor Management Area when access originates from the highway. The Management Area is defined as 5 miles each side of the highway north of the Yukon River (Title 5 Section 92.530(7) of Alaska Administrative Code). An exception exists for rural residents living within the corridor to use snowmachines for subsistence hunting on federal lands.

Our primary concern is the disturbance or displacement of Dall's sheep, moose, and muskoxen in treeless areas where suitable winter range is limited, particularly during periods of high energy deficit in late winter. Snowmachine traffic in mid to late April also has potential to inadvertently separate newly born muskoxen calves from their mothers. If this bill is passed, we recommend that some restrictions on snowmachine use remain (in the corridor at a minimum) while the extent of increased snowmachine use and its effect on wildlife populations is evaluated.

If HB 267 becomes law, action by the Alaska Board of Game would be needed to modify harvest regulations to allow hunting by snowmachine access within and beyond the corridor north of the Yukon River (358 miles) for snowmachine travel originating from the highway. Additionally, passage of the bill would likely require federal land managers to evaluate potential effects of hunting and recreation by snowmachine on subsistence activities and other resources before allowing new snowmachine use on federal land. State and federal land managers may also create or amend regulatory provisions to require minimum snow depth for snowmachine use to minimize unnecessary damage to forage plants and ground cover.

We provide the following recommendations for your consideration:

- 1) The Alaska Chapter of the Wildlife Society recommends that any changes to the current statutory prohibition on use of snowmachines within the Dalton Highway corridor include provisions that will ensure protection of wildlife and other resources from disturbance by motorized vehicles
- 2) If HB 267 is passed, the Legislature should consider keeping the 5-mile corridor closed to snowmachine use except for a limited number of marked winter trails roughly perpendicular to the Dalton Highway that will allow motorized access beyond the corridor. This option would minimize additional disturbance to wildlife and existing hunter activity within the corridor while allowing access for hunting, trapping, and snowmachine travel outside the corridor. Trailheads developed for safe parking of non-industrial vehicles during winter could include toilet shelters and bear-proof waste bins that would additionally serve the nearly 10,000 summer visitors now using the highway.
- 3) If HB 267 is passed, an area encompassing the high concentration of research plots surrounding the Toolik Lake Research Station run by the Institute of Arctic Biology at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks should be marked with signage and remain closed to snowmachine use for non-research purposes. More than 13,000 research plots exist in studies dating back to 1975, and many are subject to surface disturbance. These plots support long-term ecological studies on climate, vegetation, and wildlife.
- 4) If HB 267 passes and access for hunting is provided by the Board of Game, the Alaska Wildlife Troopers should increase highway and airborne patrol efforts during October to April to enforce regulations on the expected increase in harvest of caribou, wolves, grizzly bears, and wolverines. The post for the state wildlife trooper in Coldfoot is currently vacant.
- 5) Wildlife and land management agencies should begin scientific investigations on wildlife disturbance from snowmachine use in northern Alaska to identify sustainable practices and, if necessary, mitigation strategies. The Department of Fish and Game and federal wildlife managers should identify treeless habitats where Dall's sheep, moose, and muskoxen concentrate in winter, and evaluate baseline levels of disturbance before opening portions of the corridor to snowmachine use.
- 6) Land management agencies should begin scientific monitoring of public use of lands along the Dalton Highway for hunting, trapping, and non-consumptive recreation during September to May. Efforts to increase access from the Dalton Highway for hunting and recreation by snowmachine should be balanced with the potential of displacing wildlife and reducing opportunity for late winter viewing from the road.
- 7) The fiscal note for HB 267 should identify funding resources and define timeframes for any of the above recommendations that may be followed.

In summary, we strongly encourage the Alaska Legislature to consider the potential long-term effects that HB 267 and subsequent actions would have on wildlife populations and the full range of public uses along the Dalton Highway and public lands beyond the 5-mile corridor.

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this proposed legislation. If you have questions regarding any of the comments in this letter, please contact me via electronic mail at kris.hundertmark@alaska.edu.

Sincerely,

Kris Hundertmark, Ph.D., President
Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society