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PRESS RELEASE

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ADF&G Announces Multifaceted Effort to Rebuild Kenai Peninsula Moose Populations

(SOLDOTNA) – “The department will initiate an intensive management program to rebuild declining moose populations on the Kenai Peninsula,” said Doug Vincent-Lang, Director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation. “This will include a combination of treatments aimed at reducing predation on moose, improving moose habitat, and conserving existing moose.”

Authorized by the Alaska Board of Game in response to depressed moose numbers and robust public testimony in Soldotna last March, the program includes partnering with landholders to enhance and increase available moose browse by clearing mature forests; trapping and hunting wolves; liberalizing regulations for hunting bears; and reducing moose mortality by minimizing poaching, road kills, and by closely regulating legal moose hunting.

The moose population in Subunit 15A, which encompasses the Kenai Peninsula north of the Sterling Highway from Nikiski east to the Kenai Mountains, is well below population and harvest objectives due largely to poor habitat conditions and predation. Surveys in February found about 1,300 to 1,800 moose in 15A, far below the subunit’s population objective of 3,000 to 3,500. Almost 2,100 moose were estimated to be in the subunit as recently as 2008, further illustrating the ongoing decline.

“When the board approved this program, we were very specific,” said Board of Game Chairman Ted Spraker. “We all agreed that we will have to have habitat enhancement to reach and maintain population objectives.”

While the existing habitat conditions may be adequate to sustain current low moose numbers in Subunit 15A, as indicated by high twinning rates among other hallmarks, these conditions will continue to decline if nothing is done. Research has also revealed that predation is playing an important role in the current moose decline.

“What the board decided to do was reduce wolf numbers to arrest the moose population decline and give ourselves more time to work on habitat enhancement,” Spraker said.

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The decline of moose in Subunit 15A in recent years has been linked primarily to a lack of second-growth trees and shrubs the animals depend upon for food. Historically, second growth was generated by wildfires which burned periodically across the Kenai Peninsula. Most recently, large wildfires on the Kenai Peninsula in 1947 and 1969 created broad expanses of moose range, much of which has since developed into mature forest. The benefits of wildfires to moose habitat decline sharply after about 20 years

Habitat enhancement is a program cornerstone to increase moose numbers in Subunit 15A and early work has already begun with the cooperation of landowners. The department recently partnered with the Kenai Natives Association (KNA) to create moose browse on KNA land. Funded with a portion of a \$250,000 appropriation by the Alaska State Legislature to enhance moose habitat on the Kenai Peninsula and in the Matanuska-Susitna valleys, 85 acres were cleared this spring on KNA lands north of Sterling off Swanson River Road.

“The treatment was effective,” says ADF&G Program Coordinator Sue Rodman who recently monitored the cleared area. “Aspen seedlings are growing across the site in addition to birch seedlings and other shrub species important to moose.”

The department continues to work with federal and private land owners to develop plans to improve the region’s moose habitat on the larger scale needed to reach population objectives. Options for future habitat reclamation efforts could include controlled burns and mechanical clearing of mature forest areas.

To reduce predation on area moose, hunters and trappers will be encouraged to increase their wolf and bear harvests through established seasons, methods and means. In addition, the board authorized the department to retain a professional trapper to implement ground-based wolf removal operations in an 83-square-mile control area on state and private lands.

Ground-based wolf reduction efforts may also be supplemented by limited aerial monitoring and control. If weather conditions are favorable, local survey pilots will be chartered to determine if wolves are within the control area and whether they can be safely removed by department-authorized pilots and gunners. Department-sponsored wolf control will only be conducted on a small portion of 15A, so there is little chance that it will jeopardize the sustainability of the subunit’s wolf population. Efforts will be focused near habitat treatment areas to reduce predation on moose that are benefitting from improved habitat in those areas.

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In recent years, local advisory committees have worked with the department and the board to develop restrictive hunting regulations to protect remaining moose. Current hunting regulations allow hunters to take only bulls with a spike antler on at least one side, or antlers with minimum 50-inch spreads or featuring four or more brow tines on at least one side.

Biologists are also working with the Department of Transportation and several non-profit conservation groups to remove brush and trees along area highways to increase moose visibility for drivers and discourage moose from congregating along busy thoroughfares.

“Rebuilding the Kenai moose population to historic levels will require a comprehensive and cooperative program that includes several agencies, land managers and local residents,” said Director Vincent-Lang.

“No single element of this program is expected, by itself, to achieve our goal of increasing moose numbers in 15A,” Vincent-Lang added. “Meeting our goal will require cooperation from landowners and implementation of all facets of the program.”

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