



# US Forest Service Briefing Paper

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**Date:** 29 May 2015

**Topic:** Dramatic decline of wolf population on Prince of Wales Island, Tongass National Forest.

**Issue:** The Alexander Archipelago wolf is being considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A sixty percent decline in the wolf population in a single year potentially increases the probability of ESA listing and will almost certainly become a factor in ongoing litigation against timber sales critical to the Tongass Young-growth Transition Strategy (e.g., Big Thorne).

## **Summary/Key Points:**

- The Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), using data collected jointly with Forest Service personnel reported in a draft memorandum on 26 May that the population of Alexander Archipelago wolves on Prince of Wales Island and adjacent islands (collectively Game Management Unit 2, aka GMU2) decline from 221 animals in 2013 to 89 animals in 2014. The wolf population on Prince of Wales Island alone is estimated to be 60 animals.
- These population estimates were made prior to the 2014/2015 hunting and trapping season wherein 29 animals were known to be taken. This further reduces the likely population of wolves in GMU2 and on Prince of Wales Island.
- The sex ratio of wolves in the survey area has become significantly skewed. In 2013 the proportion of females in the sampled population was close to 0.50. The proportion of females observed in the sample population for 2014 was 0.25.
- ADFG states that natural factors (prey availability and deer habitat capability for example) are not indicated in the observed wolf population decline.
- Hunting and Trapping regulations in Alaska are established by the independent Board of Game (BOG). The BOG reduced the harvest cap for wolves in GMU2 to 20% from 30% in 2013 (for the 2013/2014 hunting and trapping season). The BOG will not meet again to reconsider wolf hunting and trapping regulations prior to March 2016.
- Citizens of Alaska may petition ADFG for special or emergency actions to temporarily modify hunting/trapping/fishing regulations. The Commissioner of ADFG is empowered to take actions on these petitions under prescribed and limited conditions.
- The Federal Subsistence harvest season for wolves in GMU2 starts 90 days prior to the State wolf season (1 September under Federal regulations, 1 December under State regulations). Given that the vast majority of persons taking wolves in GMU2 are federally qualified, the Federal Subsistence regulations effectively set the beginning of the wolf season. The wolf hunting/trapping season in GMU2 under both Federal and State regulations ends on 31 March, though may be closed earlier if the harvest of animals reaches the target level.
- It is expected that Plaintiffs in litigation against the Big Thorne timber sale will use these numbers to argue for judgement against the Forest Service based on potential additional harm to the wolf. Effects to wolves are one of the primary issues in litigation against the Big Thorne project. The Big Thorne EIS discloses that short-term adverse impacts on local wolf populations will result from project implementation.

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