

Unit 23 Working Group Meeting May 14-15, 2015 – Kotzebue, Alaska Meeting Summary

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1.0 Introduction

The Unit 23 Working Group met on May 14-15, 2015, in Kotzebue, Alaska, at the Northwest Arctic Borough (NWAB) Assembly Chambers. The meeting agenda is in Attachment 1 and the full meeting packet (including the PowerPoint presentations and handouts) are posted on the Unit 23 Working Group’s website.¹ Working Group members and others in attendance are listed in Attachments 2 and 3.

The 20-member Unit 23 Working Group was formed in 2008 to discuss fall hunting conflicts between local hunters, non-local hunters (from outside the region), and big game commercial service providers (guides, transporters) in Game Management Unit 23 in northwest Alaska. The group works together by consensus to develop and recommend solutions to fall hunting conflicts. The group’s advisory recommendations are sent to regulatory boards, land and wildlife management agencies, guides, transporters, and others to evaluate and consider for implementation.

The Purpose of the Unit 23 Working Group is to “find solutions to hunting conflicts that will preserve the Inupiaq values of the region, including opportunities for local hunters to take caribou as needed, while also providing reasonable opportunities for visiting hunters to hunt caribou in the unit.” This statement and additional information about the Working Group can be found in its April 2008 Charter, posted on the group’s website.

The objectives of the May 2015 meeting were to:

- Hear an update from the Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) on Western Arctic herd population and harvest data
- Hear about recent Board of Game actions that changed regulations for caribou harvest (seasons and bag limits) in Unit 23

¹ See Unit 23 Working Group’s project web site for additional information and previous meeting summaries:
<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=plans.unit23>

- Hear from community representatives about the 2014 hunting season & preparation for 2015 season
- Hear an update on State and federal agency education, management, planning, research, and enforcement efforts related to reducing hunting conflicts in Unit 23
- Public comment session
- Discuss additional topics raised by Working Group members

Section 2.0 lists Working Group recommendations and assignments. Section 3.0 is a general summary of information presented and the group's discussion. Section 4.0 briefly addresses future meetings. Public comments and follow-up actions to respond to comments are summarized in Section 5.0.

All Unit 23 Working Group meetings are open to the public. The meeting was broadcast on public radio station KOTZ (including web broadcast at www.kotz.org). Public comments were welcomed in person and via teleconference on Thursday afternoon, May 15, 2:00-3:00 p.m. Members of the audience were also able to ask questions and make comments at other times during the meeting.

2.0 Recommendations & Assignments

The following task will be done to implement recommendations made by the Working Group at its May 2015 meeting:

- Noatak River hunting (Sections 3.5 and 3.7 below) – The National Park Service (NPS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) will work with Working Group member Enoch Mitchell (representing Noatak and Kivalina) and members from other affected communities to discuss possible solutions to concerns raised by Noatak at the Working Group meeting. The Working Group recommended that a transporter representative also attend and Fred Smith, NWAB, requested that the planning commission members be kept informed. The agencies will set up a meeting in June or July 2015. The small group will report back to the full Working Group on the results of their discussions. Leads: Dan Stevenson, NPS; Alan Bittner, BLM; Enoch Mitchell, Noatak.
- Next Unit 23 Working Group meeting – Enoch Mitchell requested that the full Working Group meet earlier in the year in 2016, prior to the Board of Game meeting to be held in March 2016 in Fairbanks (considering Statewide Regulations).
- WAH Research – Jan Caulfield will send the list of research projects and research needs compiled by the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Technical Committee to the Unit 23 Working Group members, for their information (also send to NWAB Wildlife staff, Noah Naylor).

3.0 Summary of Working Group Presentations & Discussion

This section is a summary of information presented to the Unit 23 Working Group – including technical information from agencies and traditional knowledge shared by Working Group members. It also summarizes Working Group comments and discussion under each topic.

3.1 2014 Wildlife Harvest Data for Unit 23

Brandon Saito, ADF&G Area Wildlife Biologist, presented 2014 wildlife harvest data and hunter use data for Unit 23 overall.² Key points:

² Note that this information is reported for the entire Game Management Unit 23. However, there are areas within GMU 23 where more intensive nonlocal hunting activity and transporter activity is occurring, such as within the

- It is important for the Working Group to fully understand issues related to the herd's population and management status, as changes in harvest success and harvest regulations can affect the sensitivities and potential for conflicts among hunters in the field.
- Nonlocal hunting: There have been fewer nonlocal hunters in Unit 23 overall recent years (declining since 2006). There were less than 300 nonlocal hunters in 2014, with about $\frac{3}{4}$ of those hunters coming from outside of Alaska. This is substantially less than the high of nearly 800 in 2006 and is the lowest number of nonlocal hunters in 1998-2014. Caribou continue to be the species of greatest interest for visiting hunters. Mid-September is the peak time for nonlocal hunting.
- Areas hunted: The Guide Use Areas (GUA) most heavily used by nonlocal hunters in 2014 were GUA 002 (Noatak River), GUA 006 (Squirrel, Aggie, Eli) and GUA 005 (Selawik, Lower Kobuk). ADF&G has harvest data that shows where harvest occurred.
- Hunter transportation: About 50% of nonlocal hunters use a transporter service to go into Unit 23 and approximately 10% use a guide.

Working Group members made the following points in discussion:

- Even hunters who do not use guide or transporter services can still contribute to user conflicts.
- Clarified that of the nonlocal hunters that are hunting the Western Arctic Herd, 85% hunt in Unit 23.
- In the past several years, most of the nonlocal hunters have been going to the Noatak Area (GUA 002). Nonlocal hunter numbers in the Noatak National Preserve increased over the time period 2009-2014 and 2012 saw the highest number of clients transported into that area over the past decade, with 480 hunters transported into the Preserve (based on Big Game Commercial Services Board licensed transporter annual activity report data).
- Traditionally, local hunters hunt on the south side of the rivers, to avoid disturbing the migrating caribou. Local Working Group members are very concerned that the nonlocal hunters do not do this – they are transported to areas north of the Noatak River. Concern that they are disturbing the migration by setting camps and hunting north of the Noatak River.
- There has been a significant decline in nonlocal hunters from 2006 to 2014, but not a substantial decline in the number of transporter businesses (although one high-volume business closed after 2006). The transporters take fewer hunters into the field each day, but transport them farther from Kotzebue than in the past – with fewer flights per day.

3.2 2013 Western Arctic Herd Population Census and New Caribou Hunting Regulations for Unit 23

Jim Dau, ADF&G Wildlife Biologist, presented the following information about the Western Arctic Herd (WAH) population and Alaska Board of Game actions in March 2015 that changed the caribou harvest regulations in Unit 23.

- 2013 WAH census: The July 2013 census count of the WAH was 235,000 caribou, down from a high of 490,000 in 2003 and continuing a decline from 377,000 in 2007; 348,000 in 2009; and 324,000 in 2011. The next herd census will be done in June 2015, with census numbers available by November 2015. Although the WAH has declined substantially in the past 10 years, it is still considered to be the largest caribou herd in North America. The caribou are healthy. Although the herd is smaller, local residents have been seeing a lot of caribou because groups have been near many of the villages.

Noatak National Preserve. See presentation summary beginning on page 11 for data and trends specific to Noatak National Preserve.

- **Bull:Cow Ratio:** The bull:cow ratio for the WAH has declined from over 60 bulls:100 cows in 1993, to just over 40:100 in 2013. Overflights of the herd in 2014 indicated a ratio of approximately 39 bulls:100 cows. This is not a biological problem for the herd, but is at or slightly below the bull:cow ratio recommended in the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group (WACHWG) advisory management plan for the herd.
- **WAH Cooperative Management Plan:** The WACHWG advisory management plan for the herd (updated December 2011) recommends harvest management levels. (For more information and a copy of the plan, see www.westernarcticcaribou.org).

The Western Arctic Herd is now in a Conservative management level (See Table 1, population 200,000-265,000, with a declining trend). The plan (Appendix 2) recommends the following actions for the Conservative management level:

- No harvest of calves
 - No nonresident cow harvest
 - Restrict non-Alaska resident bull harvest
 - Encourage voluntary reductions in resident cow harvest, and
 - Limit subsistence harvest of bulls (only), if the ratio of bulls to cows falls below 40 bulls:100 cows.
- **Proposal 202 & Harvest Regulation Changes in Unit 23:** In March 2015, the Board of Game changed the caribou harvest regulations that apply in Unit 23. The Advisory Committees and other affected hunters from within Unit 23 worked together to recommend the following new regulations to the Board. The new regulations, which take effect July 1, 2015, are:

In the majority of Unit 23 (south of the Singoalik drainage), the following regulations will apply:

- Resident hunters
 - 5 caribou/day
 - No harvest of calves
 - Bulls: February 1 – October 14 (closed 10/15-1/31)
 - Cows: September 1 – March 31 (closed 4/1-8/31)
 - There is no time of year when caribou hunting is completely closed
- Nonresident hunters
 - 1 bull/regulatory year
 - No harvest of calves
 - No harvest of cows
 - Bulls: August 1 – September 30 (closed 10/1-7/31)

In the smaller portion of Unit 23 northwest of and including the Singoalik drainage, the regulations are nearly the same. The exception is that resident hunters are only allowed to take cows July 15-April 30 (closed 5/1-7/14).

Jim emphasized that with the cow harvest restrictions, it is essential to be able to tell a cow from a bull – if people are not sure, don't shoot. Evidence of sex must be attached to the hide.

He said that there is a long public service announcement that will be on the radio in both English and Inupiaq (translated by Vern Cleveland). ADF&G has also distributed posters and flyers to every community and will feature the new regulations in the 2015 issue of *Caribou Trails*, which is delivered to every post office box holder in the region. The USFWS Selawik Refuge Facebook page is also a good place to look for information.

Board of Game vice-chair Nate Turner expressed his thanks to the Advisory Committee and other members of the public who helped form a regional consensus regarding the new caribou harvest regulations for Unit 23. The Board of Game understands how much the people of this region need the caribou.

- Calf Mortality – Jim Dau expressed concern about separation of cows and calves during both subsistence and non-subsistence hunting, which leads to calves dying. He is concerned that this happened in 2014, where the aggregation of a lot of caribou above Kiana on the Kobuk River attracted a large number of local hunters, and hunting was more intense and chaotic than is usual. ADF&G will put collars on 30 calves at Onion Portage in 2015, to learn more about calf survival.
- Intensive Management (Predator Control / Habitat Improvement): State of Alaska law sets out a process for ADF&G and the Board of Game to follow to evaluate the feasibility and potential effectiveness of Intensive Management (IM) when the Western Arctic herd (or any wildlife population) gets below its population objective and harvest objective. In the case of the WAH, the population objective is $\geq 200,000$ caribou and the harvest objectives is 12,000-20,000 caribou. When the harvestable surplus is less than 12,000 caribou, ADF&G must conduct a feasibility assessment for predator control and habitat improvement options, and the Board of Game must consider the feasibility of these options. Jim noted that there are barriers to predator control. It is always contentious and is expensive (an issue with current State budget problems). The range of the herd is huge and it may not be possible to sufficiently reduce predators at this scale. Finally, the NPS and US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are proposing regulations reaffirming that predator control will not be allowed on the lands that they manage – and they manage a good portion of the herd's range in Unit 23.

Working Group members raised the following questions / points for discussion:

- Population decline – In response to a question, Jim noted that if the 2015 census is below 200,000 it may be necessary to again reconsider the cow harvest regulations.
- Noatak area – There is strong concern that there are many non-local hunters (non-Alaska residents or Alaska residents from outside of Unit 23) hunting in the Noatak area, particularly on the north side of the river where their camps and activities disturb the migration. Local Noatak hunters have been unable to get caribou in their area for a number of years, which is very hard on the community. (See Section 3.5 for more discussion.)
- Dangerous hunting practices – Trooper Justin McGinnis urged people to contact him immediately with concerns about dangerous hunting practices, so that he can follow up in the field.
- Predation – There is not much current information about wolf and bear numbers, but local observations that numbers are high in the region. By looking at collared caribou that have died, Jim Dau estimates that 75-85% of mortality is due to predation (animals are healthy, not food limited). It appears that wolf predation is 3-4 times more common than bear predation. Cyrus Harris noted that local people are seeing more predation – both wolves and bears. Joe Schuster spoke in favor of ADF&G issuing more permits for bear harvest.
- Distribution of the herd – The herd appears to be tightening up into more aggregated groups. In 2013, there were just seven groups of caribou to census (comprising the entire herd). In past years when the herd was larger, it was split into as many as 40 different groups in the range. Scientific literature shows that as the caribou populations decline, their movements becomes more variable and less predictable. This makes it harder for both subsistence and non-subsistence hunters to be successful in hunting.

3.3 Federal Subsistence Program Regulations

Chris McKee, Wildlife Biologist with the USFWS, Office of Subsistence Management (OSM), reviewed the regulatory proposals affecting Unit 23 that are now before the Federal Subsistence Board. (See meeting packet). Comments on the proposals are due to OSM by May 28, 2015. The Federal Subsistence Board will consider the proposals at a meeting in April 2016 in Anchorage. There is also a request for the Board to take “special action” (earlier action) on proposals that

would bring the federal regulations in line with the new state caribou regulations that will take effect July 1. There will be public hearings on this question, including a May 28 hearing to be held in Kotzebue. The Board will make a decision by July 2015 whether or not to approve the “special action”.

3.4 Working Group Discussion

Working Group members were asked to share their comments about the 2014 hunting season, conflicts they had experienced or were aware of during the hunting season, and ways to prepare for and reduce conflicts. They offered the following points:

- Noatak concerns regarding caribou harvest – Enoch Mitchell and the community of Noatak is very concerned about the number of nonlocal hunters who are camping and hunting in the migration corridors. In one case, visiting hunters were shooting over the head of local hunters – a very dangerous situation. He recommends that there be geographic and temporal separation between the local and nonlocal hunters – and that the federal agencies that permit the transporter services require that separation. He also recommends that transported hunters be taken to the south side of the Noatak River to camp and hunt, to avoid disturbing the caribou migration.

Enoch agreed that the change made to extend the dates of the Controlled Use Area (established in state regulation) and increased education have helped reduce hunting conflicts. However, he is still very concerned that hunting activity is too high and hunting camps are too dense in the Noatak National Preserve and are disturbing the migration. Enoch had raised these same concerns at the May 2014 Unit 23 Working Group meeting. Cyrus Harris echoed these concerns about disturbance to the lead caribou during migration – and said that the region is now feeling more of the effects of the hunting conflicts.

Enoch expressed that it is extremely difficult for the community of Noatak to not be able to successfully hunt caribou in their area. They have not had a successful season for several years – and have had to go as far as Kiana, on the Kobuk River, to hunt. Their freezers do not have caribou and important cultural needs (such as first caribou hunts for young people from the community) are also not being met.

Noatak submitted three “Agenda Change Requests” (ACR) to the Alaska Board of Game:

- ACR 1 – Require non-subsistence user camps to be spaced 3-5 miles apart in the Noatak Controlled Use Area.
- ACR 2 – Allow 1,000 caribou to pass the Noatak River before sport hunters can come on the river.
- ACR 3 – Extend the boundaries of the Noatak Controlled Use Area to Makpik Creek (about 20 miles beyond the current boundary).

(NOTE: On May 28, 2015, the Board of Game determined that these Agenda Change Request did not meet the State’s criteria to be considered “out of cycle”. Therefore, these proposals will be considered at a Board of Game meeting in 2017, along with all Region V regulation proposals.)

Dan Stevenson explained that the National Park Service (NPS), which manages the Noatak National Preserve, does not allow commercial operators to transport nonlocal hunters into the area west of the Kugururok River and Maiyumerak Mountains to hunt caribou until after September 15th (unless specifically authorized by the Superintendent on a case-by-case basis). This requirement was put in the commercial use authorizations issued to transporters for operating in the Noatak NP in 2014 and 2015. It was designed to separate the local and

nonlocal hunters spatially and give a period of time in September when local hunters could hunt uninterrupted by nonlocals. However, Enoch Mitchell responded that this isn't addressing the problem, since the caribou are now migrating later than mid-September – the start date of September 15 for nonlocal hunting is too early – and are also migrating farther east. Dan indicated that the NPS has already issued commercial use authorizations for 2015 – so it would not be possible to make changes in the date or the numbers of clients in fall 2015. However, they could change requirements for 2016-2017.

Alan Bittner commented that BLM, which manages the Squirrel/Aggie/Eli River areas, also uses the September 15 start date for transporter operations.

The Working Group continued its discussion of this concern later in the meeting, following the NPS presentation about its management of hunting in the Noatak Preserve. (See pp. 9-11, below).

- Numbers of permitted clients for transporters – The agencies were asked by Charlie Gregg, NWAB Community Planning Department (in audience), if they have the authority to limit the number of clients that each guide/transporter brings into Unit 23. Dan Stevenson responded that the NPS can limit client number through its commercial use authorizations, but would not be able to change the numbers until 2016 (since transporters have already received their commercial use authorizations for 2015). Alan Bittner, BLM, indicated that this could be addressed in the Squirrel River management plan that is being developed. Susan Georgette, USFWS, said that they have not placed limits on client numbers in the Selawik Refuge – but she is aware that they have done this on other refuges in the State of Alaska and is researching options. Valerie Baxter, State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources said that the State can not limit the number of clients through its land use permits.

3.5 Education Update

Meghan Nedwick, ADF&G Education Associate in Kotzebue, gave an update on the many education efforts related to reducing hunting conflicts in Unit 23.

- Pilot education – In 2010, a State regulation took affect (proposed by Unit 23 Working Group and approved by Board of Game) that requires a one-time online orientation session for aircraft pilots transporting big game or meat in Unit 23. As of May 2015, 345 pilots have taken the test, including 287 Alaska residents and 58 nonresidents. Just six pilots took the test between May 2014 and May 2015. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) will continue to provide information to pilots about ways to avoid conflicts in Unit 23 during their routine safety workshops and sportsman's shows in 2015.
- Printed Outreach/Education Information – ADF&G has updated and is reprinting the “Hunt Legal – Hunt Smart” pamphlet, that is widely-distributed within the region and to nonlocal hunters by the management agencies, guides and transporters. Other written education material includes posters regarding proper caribou meat salvage, an easy reference “rack card” about meat salvage requirements, and handouts with identification tips for how to tell a bull from cow caribou. Meghan is working on an edition of *Caribou Trails* to issue in summer 2015.
- Hunter Education – ADF&G continues to offer hunter education courses – and adds more classes and more villages each year. There were classes in Kiana and Kotzebue in 2014, and will be classes in Buckland, Kobuk and Kotzebue in 2015.
- Land Status – Updated land status information provided annually by BLM is now geo-referenced. Using a free App, people can access maps and find their exact location (and land status of that location) on their electronic devices while in the field.

In a comment from the audience, Lance Kramer from NANA Corporation noted that the Kiana Traditional Council is making a video about proper hunting practices to reduce conflicts in that area. NANA Corporation is also applying for a grant from the NWAB to create videos for students, including hunter education.

3.6 State and Federal Agency Management and Enforcement

US Fish and Wildlife Service – Selawik National Wildlife Refuge Manager Susan Georgette, USFWS, presented the following information:

- **Refuge Plan Separates Local and Nonlocal Hunters** – The Selawik Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan was completed in 2011. The plan identified an area of the Kobuk Delta where commercial use by transporters and guides is not permitted. In this area, Refuge lands are intertwined with private land and there is no previous pattern of commercial use. Local subsistence hunters heavily use the area, accessing it by boat. Most access sites, camp locations, and desirable hunting sites are private allotments. The plan includes a provision for the Refuge Manager to approve access for commercial use in this area on a case-by-case basis.
- **Commercial Guide/Transporter Update** – The Selawik Wildlife Refuge issued special use permits in 2014 to one guide and four transporters (only two transporters operated). These businesses served 36 clients in 2014 (compared with the high of 154 hunters in 2000) and clients harvested 11 caribou, 17 moose, four bears, and one wolf. The Refuge plan allows only one guide, which is selected by a competitive process. The Refuge does not currently limit the number of clients per guide/transporter, but Susan Georgette is researching the agency's authorities in case there is a need to do that in the future. The Refuge can attach stipulations to the transporter permits.
- **Enforcement** – The USFWS will continue to coordinate with the Alaska Wildlife Troopers, the other agencies, and NANA Purcell Trespass on enforcement activities during the fall hunting season.

Working Group members made the following comments:

- Working Group members expressed appreciation for the Selawik Refuge management plan – and favored the separation of the local and nonlocal hunting areas provided in that plan.
- Joe Schuster, who guides in the Refuge, serves about 20 hunters/year (as a guide or outfitter). All of these hunters have a wolf hunt tag, but they still take just 1-5 wolves per year. Wolves are very elusive and difficult to harvest. He also noted that only three of the four permitted transporters operated in 2014.

Bureau of Land Management – Alan Bittner, Manager, BLM Anchorage Field Office, addressed the following points:

- **BLM Offices / Staff** – The Northwest Region (including Unit 23 area) is now managed by the BLM Anchorage Field Office. Contact: Alan Bittner, Field Manager, 907-267-1285. BLM's Kotzebue field office is currently vacant and BLM is evaluating the need for this remote office considering workload and budget constraints.
- **Land status maps** – BLM is keeping updated land status maps for Unit 23, which include topographic information. The maps are available on BLM and ADF&G web sites and are also available on DVD for distribution to permittees. The maps are part of the curriculum for the pilot orientation and test.
- **Guide/Transporter Permitting** – In 2014, BLM Fairbanks District authorized 10 guides and four transporters in Unit 23. These permits will be issued again in 2015, unless there are violations or the permits are ended or withdrawn by the applicants. In the Squirrel River area,

no new guide applications will be processed and the number of transporters will be capped at four, pending the completion of the Squirrel River Special Recreation Management Plan. Guides seeking permits to operate outside of the Squirrel River area will be accepted and processed by BLM.

- Squirrel River Special Recreation Management Plan – The BLM Anchorage Field Office will be completing the plan, which will address the allocation of Special Recreation Permits (required for guide and transport activities) in the Squirrel River Special Recreation Management Area. In recent years, there has been fewer caribou – and therefore fewer nonlocal hunters – in the Squirrel River area.
- Enforcement – BLM is planning to hire a ranger/pilot based in Anchorage. Will have an enforcement presence in Unit 23 in the fall 2015 hunting season.

Working Group members made the following comments:

- Would like to see locations where guides and transporters operated (drop-offs) in the Noatak River area (like USFWS has mapped on the Selawik Refuge). BLM replied that they will look at this more closely in the Squirrel River plan.
- BLM needs to include traditional knowledge in the Squirrel River plan.
- The Squirrel River plan needs to show where guides and transporters are located (drop-offs, camps) and how many animals are harvested and in what locations. There is concern that the north/south caribou migration routes are being impacted.
- Julie Owen commented that transporters do not take clients into the Squirrel River, because they conduct most of their transporting prior to September 15 – and the Squirrel is not open for guide/transporter activity prior to September 15.

State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources (DNR) – Valerie Baxter, DNR, said that there is limited State lands in Unit 23 and only three guides operating (via permit) on these lands. The State does not limit the number of guided clients. Transporters do not need a State permit to access State lands.

The State of Alaska Legislature never took action on a proposed Guide Concession Program, which the Unit 23 Working Group had supported (it was never called up for a vote in the Legislature). Nate Turner indicated that the Board of Game strongly supports the program.

National Park Service – Dan Stevenson, representing the NPS Western Arctic National Parklands, addressed the following topics:

- Noatak National Preserve, Special Commercial Use Authorization Area - The NPS issues Commercial Use Authorizations (CUA) for commercial *transporter* visitor services for the Noatak National Preserve. There were six transporters operating in the Preserve in 2014, serving 424 clients. (Note: This does not include the dozen or so CUA air taxi clients that were transported as 'incidental transport of big game' in the Noatak National Preserve.)
- September 15th Start Date for Transporter Services – Beginning in 2012, transporter services have been permitted to transport non-subsistence caribou hunters into the area west of the Kugururok River and Maiyumerak Mountains only after September 15th, unless authorized by the Superintendent to provide services before this date. (The Superintendent consults with CUA holders, local villages and other agencies between August 15-September 15 to discuss the status of the caribou migration across the Preserve and to determine if access prior to September 15 will be allowed.) This start date will be in effect through the fall 2015; the NPS would be willing to reconsider this approach and date for 2016. (See notes from the Working Group's additional discussion below, and the "Assignment" on p. 2)

- Transporter Briefings – Each year, Dan Stevenson holds a pre-season briefing with transporters to make sure they understand the NPS’s requirements and expectations to reduce user conflicts. The transporters send out information to their clients before their hunt, including the *Hunt Legal, Hunt Smart* booklet.
- Communication with villages – The NPS continues to outreach to villages through its Tribal Liaison Willie Goodwin and its two local resident liaisons in Noatak and Kiana.
- Enforcement – NPS publicizes a phone number for people to call to report any complaints about “bad behavior” in the field, and the agency’s law enforcement staff follow-up on those complaints. The NPS uses boats, fixed wing aircraft and helicopters in the field and contact nonlocal hunters in their camps.
- Research & Outreach – The NPS hosts meetings about caribou research several times a year in Kotzebue and has wildlife education staff. The NPS is also funding caribou research (including two projects reported on later in this meeting).

Following the NPS presentation, the Working Group continued its discussion of concerns related to nonlocal hunting in the Noatak Preserve and adjacent BLM lands. Key points included:

- Enoch Mitchell would like to look at maps with the NPS and see if it is possible to put nonlocal hunters in locations that would not affect Noatak and would avoid disturbing the caribou migration. He thought they had agreed with the NPS to do this in the past – why isn’t this being done?
- Enoch continued that he understands that it is hard to put limits on the number of clients per guide or transporter business, but could there be more limits on the number of businesses? Enoch recommends that some areas north of the Noatak River be closed to commercial operators (such as the migration corridors that lead to the villages) and that the State’s Controlled Use Area be extended upriver by an additional 25 miles. This would reduce contact between local and nonlocal hunters.
- The caribou have recently been migrating farther east – putting them farther from Noatak.
- Dan Stevenson said that the NPS permits do require a five-mile space between transporter camps, which is one of Noatak’s requests.
- Cyrus Harris spoke in favor of allowing 1,000 caribou to pass during the early migration, before guide, transporter and nonlocal hunting activity begins. In discussion of this idea, some Working Group members spoke in favor, while others questioned how the permitting agencies and commercial operators would know when the 1,000 caribou had passed, were unsure that this approach would help subsistence hunting (since the caribou migration has been unpredictable in its timing and route), and said that businesses need to have a set date in advance to be able to book their clients.
- Fred Smith, NWAB, proposed that the federal land managers for areas north of the Noatak River (NPS and BLM) stop commercial guide/transporter activities in the areas that they manage, “until there is a plan in place to provide for access and use of those [caribou] resources for subsistence purposes”. The Unit 23 Working Group members were polled regarding their support for this proposal, but did not reach consensus.³ Those who spoke in favor expressed their strong concern that guide/transporter and nonlocal hunting activity north of the Noatak River is disturbing the caribou migration, is not following traditional knowledge about the caribou migration (“our voices haven’t been heard or honored”), and is affecting subsistence hunting success at Noatak and other communities. Those who did not support the proposal also expressed their strong support for subsistence caribou harvest and

³ The Unit 23 Working Group Charter says the group “will use a consensus-building process... If the group cannot reach consensus...differing opinions will be explained in the...meeting summaries...”

understand the concerns of the communities, but did not think that stopping all transporter activity would solve the problem. They noted that caribou migration is very hard to predict, that caribou change their ranges, that there is not certainty that the nonlocal hunting activity is affecting the migration, and that stopping the commercial use permitting would close guide/transporter businesses. Several Working Group members abstained from expressing their opinion on this proposal.

The Working Group did reach consensus that there must be more communication between Noatak, other affected communities, the land managers, and representatives of the commercial operators – to see if there are approaches that would address local community concerns while still allowing businesses to operate. (See Assignment, below)

- **Assignment** – The Working Group asked NPS and BLM to meet with Enoch Mitchell and Working Group members from other affected communities and representative of transporter businesses to discuss possible solutions to Noatak’s concerns. The agencies will set up a meeting in June or July 2015. Fred Smith, NWAB, requested that the Borough planning commission members be kept informed. The small group will report back to the full Working Group on the results of their discussions; Enoch Mitchell requested that the full Working Group meet earlier in the year in 2016 to hear the results of this small group’s work, prior to the Board of Game meeting to be held in March 2016 in Fairbanks.

3.7 Research Project Reports

Caribou Harvest in Noatak National Preserve – 2014 data and trends – Andrew Ackerman, NPS Social Scientist, provided data from 2014 for caribou harvest by nonlocal hunters in the Noatak National Preserve and trends in transported hunter numbers:

- In 2014, 220 caribou were harvested by nonlocal hunters in the Noatak National Preserve.
- The number of transported hunters in the Preserve was 424 in 2014, which is a decrease from the high of 480 in 2012 but is higher than 2009-2011 and 2013.

Sport Hunter Survey (2010-2013), Noatak National Preserve – Andrew Ackerman also presented results from the NPS’ survey of non-local (non-subsistence) hunters, hunting in the Noatak National Preserve (NP), 2010-2013. The survey measured trip and hunter characteristics, hunter motivations, hunt-specific events and observed impacts, hunter evaluations of their experiences and of management options. Key survey results included:

- Survey response – 384 non-local hunters (representing 222 hunting groups) completed the survey, of 1,127 contacted (34% response rate). Of these respondents, 249 hunters completed a map showing where and when they hunted in the Preserve. The NPS also used data from the State of Alaska, Division of Occupational Licensing transporter database (2010-2013), and from the activity reports submitted to the NPS by the six transporters authorized to operate in the Preserve.
- Where hunters are from – 73% of the non-local hunters come from the Lower 48 states or territories (most from West/mountain west, and Midwest states). 87% of the non-local hunters who live in Alaska come from a metropolitan area.
- Mode of access to Unit 23 – All of the survey respondents had used either a transporter aircraft or air taxi for transportation into Unit 23.
- Hunter information – The non-local hunters’ primary sources of information about hunting and camping in the Noatak NP were friends or family, or the transporter/pilot who served them. They were well informed about meat salvage and care requirements. There was less information provided on land status, subsistence hunting activity, and subsistence areas to avoid.

- Reasons to hunt in Noatak NP – The primary reasons non-local hunters chose to hunt in the Preserve included opportunity to experience quiet/solitude, opportunity to hunt the Western Arctic Herd, remote/wild character, general availability of big game.
- Number of caribou seen during hunting – 39% of hunters were seeing none to few (<20) caribou a day. However, 61% generally saw quite a few (from 21 to over 200 caribou).
- “Caribou let pass”
 - 18% of the hunting groups took a shot at the first caribou they saw. However, 22% of the hunting groups let 1-10 caribou pass, 23% let more than 10 pass, and 21% did not shoot at the caribou they saw at all. 16% of the hunting groups did not see any caribou.
 - Daily hunt data for individual hunters show that hunters shot at the first caribou that they saw on less than 5% of the days they were in the field, and they shot at the first caribou only when they were seeing smaller groupings of animals (1-100). On days when hunters saw larger groupings (>100 caribou), they did not shoot at the first caribou they saw.
- Caribou harvested (data from 2009-2013) –
 - 54% of the hunting groups harvested 1-2 caribou; 8% took 3-10, and 0.5% took >10.
 - 21% of hunting groups did not shoot at a caribou. The State’s database of transporter activity (2009-2013) indicates that the number of non-local hunters who did not harvest a caribou has been increasing.
- Encounters while hunting – On the average, non-local hunters are encountering 7 propeller aircraft per trip (with a high of 16). They are seeing an average of 2 other non-local hunters per trip (with a high of 7), and one local hunter/trapper group per trip.
- Locations hunted – Map data from 2010-2013 show that hunt locations were concentrated upriver from the village of Noatak and the Controlled Use Area – farther upstream along the Noatak River and the Anisak River drainage. Hunters rarely moved their camp locations (the exception to this is floating/rafting hunters, which typically started in the upper Noatak River drainage and ended in Noatak village).
- For more information, contact: Andrew Ackerman, NPS, email: Andrew_ackerman@nps.gov, phone: 907-455-0643

The following points/questions were raised in Working Group discussion:

- Andrew Ackerman clarified that the NPS requires five mile spacing between camps set up by transported groups.
- Cyrus Harris noted that the maps show that the majority of nonlocal hunting activity is on the north side of the Noatak River, raising concern about potential to disrupt the caribou migration.
- Others noted that the mapped data showing camp locations is for four seasons (2010-2013). The mapped camps are not all present on the ground at one time – but spread out across each hunting season and the four different years.

Noatak Caribou Traditional Knowledge Project – Gabriela Halas, University of Alaska graduate student, summarized her research documenting the village of Noatak’s traditional knowledge regarding (1) caribou behavior and migration, and (2) impact of human activity (primarily non-local hunters and transporters) on caribou migration and behavior. The research included 62 surveys of active hunters, and more detailed mapping with 20 local experts. Key findings included:

- Most Noatak respondents reported that their quality and success of hunting is reduced by contacting non-local hunters (hunters from outside the northwest Alaska region) and airplane activity.

- In fall 2013, Noatak hunters encountered an average of 5 non-local hunters and 8 planes while hunting (with a high of 24 non-local hunters and 62 planes reported).
- Noatak is reporting some significant changes in caribou hunting in the last five years. To be successful, Noatak hunters are having to take more hunting trips, travel farther, go later in the fall, and spent more days hunting. Even with this change in effort, 73% of respondents replied that they have harvested fewer caribou in the last five years.
- A variety of ecological factors and human activities are reported by Noatak hunters to affect their caribou hunting. Planes and non-local hunters are perceived to be the main impacts to caribou hunting, followed by climate change, wolves, and bears.
- Respondents are concerned that non-local hunting activity and airplanes activity diverts the caribou off of their typical migration route and river crossings.
- Noatak residents created maps depicting five-year use areas for caribou and areas of overlap with non-local hunting and transporter activity occurred. They also mapped caribou fall movements, important caribou habitat areas, and areas of predator use.
- For more information, contact Gabriela Halas, email: ghalas@alaska.edu

The following points were raised in Working Group discussion:

- Q - The map of important caribou habitat areas showed, “other important [habitat] areas” on the Anisak River drainage. What are the habitat values there? A – Gabriela looked into this at a later time and indicated that one individual generally noted that caribou coming from this area were healthy, so it was noted on the map as “other important habitat area”. No specific habitat characteristics were noted by that respondent.
- Comment that there is a need for more research about what is happening with caribou in the calving grounds, in terms of predation, habitat, etc., that may be affecting the herd size. Jim Dau responded that ADF&G has stayed away from the calving grounds, since that is such a sensitive life stage for caribou. However, they will put 30 collars on calves at Onion Portage this year to learn more about calf survival/mortality.

Assignment – Jan Caulfield will send the list of research projects and research needs compiled by the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Technical Committee to the Unit 23 Working Group members, for their information (also send to NWAB Wildlife staff, Noah Naylor).

4.0 Future of Unit 23 Working Group

The Unit 23 Working Group will plan to meet again in Kotzebue in early 2016. Enoch Mitchell requested that the group meet before the Board of Game’s meeting in April 2016, which is scheduled to address “Statewide” regulatory issues. One of the primary agenda topics for the Unit 23 Working Group will be to hear from the subgroup working on issues related to non-local hunting activity in the upper Noatak area (see page 10, above).

5.0 Public / Other Agency Comments

Comments were welcomed from people attending the meeting in Kotzebue, as well as through a toll-free telephone line. There was a set public comment period on Thursday, May 14, 2-3 p.m. In addition, comments and questions were accepted at other times during the meeting. The following comments were offered.

- Enoch Shiedt, public – Transporters relocate hunters mid-hunt if they aren’t successful. This increases the disturbance in the field.

- Lance Kramer, NANA –
 - Expressed strong concern that local communities were not well represented on the Working Group at this meeting. (NOTE: Unfortunately, many of the local Working Group members were not present due to illness or other appointments). Lance recommended that Working Group members identify an alternate to attend the meetings when they are not available.
 - Recommended that each local Working Group representative give a traditional knowledge report at the meeting about what they saw and experienced during the hunting season and with regard to the caribou population and migration.
 - There is a need for more research on the herd and its decline (e.g., calf survival rate, cow mortality rate, migration routes). The NWAB has a Wildlife Department that has fund available for research. Information needs should be identified and funds sought. (Jan Caulfield stated that the Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group's Technical Committee has developed a list of data/information needs. She will distribute that to the Unit 23 Working Group.)
 - Commented that no one is taking bears. ADF&G should let every hunter have access to a bear tag. (Concern about predation on caribou.)
 - Suggested that the Unit 23 Working Group pass a resolution asking Tech Cominco to let the leaders of the caribou migration cross the Red Dog Road undisturbed (establishing more than a 500 yard buffer between vehicles and the caribou.) He would like this resolution to be sent to the Red Dog subsistence committee. (Note, the Unit 23 Working Group did not address this request at this meeting.)
- Millie Hawley, Kivalina, NWAB Planning Commission Member – Commend Enoch Mitchell for working to help with these issues and represent the people of Noatak. Need to recognize that the people in the communities have a relationship with their homeland; they feed off of it and live off of it.
- Damon Schaeffer (comment via phone) – Need to explain the new State caribou harvest regulations to villages in the Inupiaq language, so it is well understood. (See page 4 regarding how ADFG is getting information out to the communities/local hunters in both English and Inupiaq.)
- Steve Machida, ADFG – Regarding research needs, there is lack of data about predators (particularly wolves). May be possible to use social science methodology to interview people about what they have observed in terms of predator numbers, rather than doing a population census for wolves. ADFG has approached the University of Alaska Institute of Social and Economic Research about this idea. Perhaps it could be done in cooperation with the NWAB Wildlife Department.
- Carol Wesley, Noatak, NWAB Planning Commission Member –
 - Noatak hunters have to go farther to look for the caribou. Limiting the number of transported clients and the locations of drop-offs would be beneficial to Noatak hunts. Last fall, three Noatak families pooled their funds to buy \$1,200 in gas (\$10/gallon) and traveled 104 miles on the river to hunt for caribou. Subsistence foods are essential; purchased meat is extremely expensive.
 - Recommend that someone from NANA Corporation Lands be on the Unit 23 Working Group.
- Darlene Hadley, Buckland, NWAB Planning Commission Member – There is a migration of caribou that has been diverted by the guided/transported hunters, so in the fall they are not accessible to local hunters – who are now not getting enough subsistence caribou. We need to

know where the guides and transporters are operating, relative to the migratory corridors. Concerned they are diverting the caribou migration.

- Walter Sampson, Kotzebue – Spoke initially in Inupiaq. He questioned the mission of the Unit 23 Working Group and what it had accomplished. Stated that the Unit 23 Working Group should not operate by consensus, but should vote on motions. Noatak concerns must be addressed. Villages are on the losing end of this process. Fuel costs are high and people must have affordable access to subsistence resources. Very concerned about meat waste. As the resources decline, the regulations need to protect those who are trying to put food on their table. Villages need the opportunity to hunt and to get food.

Unit 23 Working Group May 14-15, 2015

Northwest Arctic Borough Assembly Chambers
163 Lagoon Street, Kotzebue, Alaska

Thursday, May 14
10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Friday, May 15
9:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

***Public radio station KOTZ will broadcast the meeting on
Wednesday, May 14, 10:00 am - 4:00 pm and
Thursday, May 15, 9:00 am - 12:30 pm
Tune to 89.9 FM or AM 720, or listen via the web at www.kotz.org***

AGENDA

Meeting Topics

- Update on Western Arctic herd population, movement, and harvest data.
- Report on March 2015 Board of Game meeting, changes to caribou harvest regulations. Update on Federal Subsistence Board consideration of regulation changes.
- Discuss 2014 hunting season & preparation for 2015 season
- Education efforts (general public, pilots, youth)
- Federal and state agency planning, permitting, management, and enforcement topics related to reducing hunting conflicts in Unit 23
- Research reports
- Public comment session – By phone or at Assembly Chambers
Thursday, May 14, 2:00-3:00 p.m.
Dial 1-800-268-5851
- Discussion of additional topics and recommendations raised by Working Group members

Thursday, May 14

9:30 a.m. *Coffee/Refreshments*

10:00 a.m. Welcome, Moment of Silence, Introductions – Review Agenda / Revise if necessary

- List of Unit 23 Working Group members
- Summary of recommendations made by the Working Group at past meetings (*reached by group consensus*)

10:15 a.m. Unit 23 Big Game Population, Hunter & Harvest Information
Brandon Saito, Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G)

11:00 a.m. Unit 23 Caribou Harvest – Regulation Changes

- State Regulation Changes affecting Western Arctic Herd harvest, adopted March 2015 by Alaska Board of Game
Jim Dau, ADF&G
- Federal Subsistence Program – Regulatory proposals received in spring 2015 regarding Western Arctic Herd
Chris McKee, US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), Office of Subsistence Management
- Working Group questions & comments

12:00 p.m. Lunch

1:15 p.m. Working Group Discussion (*more discussion time on Day 2*)

- 1) Discussion of 2014 hunting season and preparation for 2015
- 2) What changes in user conflicts might there be, with the herd population decline and hunt regulation changes?
- 3) Recommendations regarding ways to prepare for and reduce conflicts?

2:00 p.m. Public Comment Opportunity regarding user conflicts related to hunting in Unit 23 – Call-In & In-person Comments

Comments by phone, dial 1-800-268-5851

To participate in Kotzebue, please come to the Northwest Arctic Borough Assembly Chambers. Time per comment may be limited, to ensure opportunity for those who want to speak.

3:00 p.m. Break

Thursday, May 14, continued

- 3:20 p.m. Education Update** – Update on Unit 23 education initiatives (general public, youth, pilot education, work with Federal Aviation Administration)
Meghan Nedwick, ADF&G
- 3:50 p.m. State & Federal Agency Management** – Agency presentations and Working Group comments/discussion
- Selawik National Wildlife Refuge
Susan Georgette, US Fish and Wildlife Service
 - Bureau of Land Management – Squirrel River Management
Alan Bittner, Bureau of Land Management
 - State of Alaska – Permitting of guides/transporters & status of Guide Concession Program
Valerie Baxter, Department of Natural Resources
- 5:00 p.m. Adjourn for the day**

Friday, May 15

- 8:30 a.m. Coffee/Refreshments*
- 9:00 a.m. Welcome**
- 9:10 a.m. Federal Agency Management – Agency presentations and Working Group discussion**
- Noatak National Preserve
Stephanie Stephens, National Park Service (NPS)
 - Research Reports
 - Non-subsistence hunting in Noatak Preserve
Andrew Ackerman, NPS
- 10:20 a.m. Break**
- 10:40 a.m. Continue research reports**
- Noatak Traditional Knowledge Project
Gabriela Halas, University of Alaska Fairbanks
(*teleconference*)

Friday, May 15, continued

11:00 a.m. Working Group Discussion & Action

- Topics raised by Working Group members
- Follow-up on presentations or public comments
- Working Group Recommendations / Actions
- Future of Unit 23 Working Group – meet again in 2016?

12:15 p.m. Assignments / Wrap up

12:30 p.m. Adjourn

Additional information about the Unit 23 Working Group can be found at the project web site:

<http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=plans.unit23>

**Unit 23 Working Group Membership
& Attendance
May 14-15, 2014 Meeting**

Name	Affiliations
Valerie Baxter	Alaska Department of Natural Resources
Alan Bittner	Bureau of Land Management
Phil Driver (unable to attend)	Alaska Professional Hunting Association Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group
Susan Georgette	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Cyrus Harris	Maniilaq Association Western Arctic Caribou Herd Working Group
Stosh Hoffman	Board of Game
Victor Karmun (unable to attend)	Northwest Arctic Regional Advisory Council Kotzebue Sound Advisory Committee
Melvin Lee	Upper Kobuk Advisory Committee
Chris McKee	USFWS Office of Subsistence Management
Enoch Mitchell	Noatak/Kivalina Advisory Committee
Ron Moto, Sr. (unable to attend)	North Seward Peninsula Advisory Committee
Julie Owen	Transporter representative
Brandon Saito	Alaska Department of Fish and Game
Pete Schaeffer (unable to attend)	Kotzebue Sound Advisory Council
Joe Schuster	Alaska Professional Hunting Association
Fred Smith	Northwest Arctic Borough
Dan Stevenson	National Park Service
Raymond Stoney (unable to attend)	Northwest Arctic Regional Advisory Council Lower Kobuk Advisory Committee
Nate Turner	Alaska Board of Game
Alex Whiting (unable to attend)	Kotzebue IRA

Public & Agency Attendance List / Presenters
 Unit 23 Working Group Meeting
 May 14-15, 2015 – Kotzebue, Alaska

Name	Affiliation
Andrew Ackerman (presenter)	National Park Service
Douglas Ballou	Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Anchorage
Nikki Braem	Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), Division of Subsistence
Jim Dau	ADFG, Wildlife Conservation Division
Alice Davis	public
Brenda Erlich	public
John Erlich, Sr.	public
Daniel Foster, Sr.	Northwest Arctic Borough (NWAB) Planning Commission, Selawik
Charlie Gregg	NWAB, Planning Department
Darlene Hadley	NWAB Planning Commission, Buckland
Gabriela Halas	University of Alaska
Millie Hawley	NWAB Planning Commission, Kivalina
Marci Johnson	National Park Service (NPS), Western Arctic Parklands
Lance Kramer	NANA
Harold Lambert	NWAB Planning Commission, Kotzebue
Steve Machida	ADFG, Wildlife Conservation Division
Barbara MacManus	NWAB Planning Commission, Ambler
Jim Magdanz	public
Justin McGinnis	Alaska Wildlife Troopers
Meghan Nedwick	ADFG, Wildlife Conservation Division
Hilary Robison	NPS, Western Arctic Parklands
Walter Sampson	NWAB Assembly, Kotzebue
Bruce Seppi	BLM, Anchorage
Enoch Shiedt	Public
Tom Sparks	BLM, Nome
Brittany Sweeney	US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Selawik National Wildlife Refuge
N. Carol Wesley	NWAB Planning Commission, Noatak
David Zabriskie	USFWS, Selawik National Wildlife Refuge

Public comments presented by:

Lance Cramer, Kotzebue
 Darlene Hadley, Buckland
 Millie Hawley, Kivalina
 Walter Sampson, Kotzebue
 Enoch Shiedt, Kotzebue
 Carol Wesley, Noatak
 Damon Schaeffer (phone)