



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 Bureau of Land Management
 National Park Service
 Bureau of Indian Affairs

Federal Subsistence Board

1101 E Tudor Rd, MS 121
 Anchorage Alaska 99503



Forest Service

SUBSISTENCE HUNTING

SPECIAL ACTION

**Under Authority of 50 CFR 100.10 and .19
 36 CFR 242.10 and .19**

Special Action No.:	FC-01-2016	Issued at:	Glennallen, Alaska October 14, 2016
Effective Date:	October 15, 2016	12:01 a.m.	
Expiration Date	October 20, 2016	11:59 p.m.	

Unless superseded by subsequent Special Action

EXPLANATION:

SUBSISTENCE HARVEST OF THE NELCHINA CARIBOU HERD IN UNITS 13A AND 13B OPENS FROM 12:01 A.M. OCTOBER 15, 2016 to 11:59 P.M. OCTOBER 20, 2016

The subsistence harvest opportunity for the Nelchina Caribou Herd has been very limited during the August 1 to September 30, 2016 season. This action follows the conservation strategy discussed with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game and the Southcentral and Eastern Interior Alaska Subsistence Regional Advisory Councils. If the caribou migration does not occur before October 21, the start of the winter season, the requested season extension would not be announced.

REGULATION

50 CFR 100.26(n)(13)(iii) is amended to read:

Unit 13—Caribou

Units 13A and 13B

Units 13A and 13B - 2 caribou by Federal registration permit only. The sex of the animals that may be taken will be announced by the Glennallen Field Office Manager of the Bureau of Land Management in consultation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game area biologist and Chairs of the Eastern Interior Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council and the Southcentral Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council.

*Aug. 1-Sept. 30
 Oct. 21-Mar. 31*

2 caribou by Federal registration permit only during a 10 day period between Oct. 1 and Oct 21. The season and sex of the animals that may be taken will be announced by the Glennallen Field Office Manager of the Bureau of Land Management in consultation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game area biologist and Chairs of the Eastern Interior Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council and the Southcentral Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council. **October 15 - 20**

Unit 13 remainder

2 bulls by Federal registration permit only *Aug. 1–Sept. 30*
Oct. 21–Mar. 31

2 bulls by Federal registration permit only during a 10 day period between Oct. 1 and Oct. 21. The season for the 10 day period will be announced by the Glennallen Field Office Manager of the Bureau of the Land Management in consultation with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game area biologist and Chairs of the Eastern Interior Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council and the Southcentral Federal Subsistence Regional Advisory Council. *No early open season, the season reopens Oct 21 – Mar 31.*

JUSTIFICATION

Biological

Nelchina Caribou Herd (NCH) calving occurs in the eastern Talkeetna Mountains from the Little Nelchina River north to Fog Lakes, with the core calving area from the Little Nelchina River to Kosina Creek. Core calving areas are also used during post calving and early summer (Schwanke 2011). The NCH disperses during the summer and early fall. Their fall distribution can extend from the Denali Highway near Butte Lake, across the Alphabet Hills and Lake Louise flats, and as far east as the Gulkana River (Schwanke 2011, Schwanke and Robbins 2013).

The NCH rut, which occurs in different areas depending on the year, typically occurs from late September through mid-October. In 2009 and 2010, the rut occurred in the center of Unit 13, primarily in Units 13A, 13B, and 13E. In 2011, the rut started after the NCH started to migrate and occurred in the area from Tangle Lakes through the Chistochina River drainage in Units 13B and 13C, and in Drop Creek in the northern part of Unit 11. In 2012, the rut was scattered across Unit 13 with groups rutting in the Paxson area, in the west between the Upper Susitna and MacLaren rivers, and in the Upper Talkeetna River drainage (Schwanke and Robbins 2013). Disturbance during the fall rut often results in extremely elevated stress levels (Calef et al. 1976, Jakimchuck 1980, Schideler et al. 1986). Disturbances may result in increased risk of physical injury, herd

fragmentation, disruption of normal mating behavior, increased daily expenditure levels, and decreased reproductive success (Webster 1997).

The NCH typically leaves Unit 13 in October for wintering areas in Units 11, 12, and 20E and typically does not return until April. Some caribou remain in the northern portion of Unit 13 and are an important food source for Federally qualified subsistence users during the winter season. Winter range in Unit 20E is generally considered high quality due to high lichen biomass as a result of old burns (>50 years) (Dale 2000, Joly et al. 2003). In 2004, a large proportion of NCH winter range in Unit 20E burned which resulted in avoidance of the burned areas, increased use of adjacent unburned areas, as well as use of previously unused areas such as Mosquito Fork, Kechumstuk Mountain, and areas east into the Yukon (Schwanke and Robbins 2013). Many caribou (60-95%) still winter in Unit 20E, although caribou now utilize adjacent unburned areas (Schwanke 2011). In addition to winter habitat loss in Unit 20E, competition with the Fortymile caribou herd, which also uses Unit 20E year round (Boertje and Gardner 1998) and is increasing in population, could impact the NCH. Winter distribution for the NCH in 2006 extended into Unit 13E, across 13A and 13B, and northeast into Units 11, 12 and 20E (Tobey and Kelleyhouse 2007). In some years, a small number of caribou winter in Unit 13D and have been observed as far south as the Edgerton Highway.

The NCH population has fluctuated widely since the 1940s. The caribou population was estimated to be between 5,000 –15,000 in the 1940s, 70,000 in the mid-1960s, 7,000–10,000 in 1972, and 50,000 in 1995.

State management goals and objectives for the NCH are as follows (Schwanke and Robbins 2013):

- Maintain a fall population of 35,000–40,000 caribou, with a minimum of 40 bulls:100 cows and 40 calves:100 cows.
- Provide for the annual harvest of 3,000–6,000 caribou.

From 2001 to 2013 fall population estimates for the NCH have remained relatively stable, with an estimated herd size between 30,000-50,000 animals (**Table 1**). Relatively mild winters and low predation during 2014/2015 and 2015/2016 have allowed the Nelchina caribou population to increase (ADF&G 2016). Recent analysis from a July 2016 photo survey estimates that the Nelchina caribou population is near last year's estimate of 48,700 (**Table 1**) (ADF&G 2016). There is concern that if the NCH remains above 40,000, productivity could be reduced due to a decline in range conditions (Schwanke and Robbins 2013).

Historically, the productivity and recruitment of the NCH has been high, with an average of 52 calves:100 cows (1985-1996). The annual harvestable surplus of Nelchina caribou is dependent on productivity and survival of calves, which is determined from surveys in June and October conducted by ADF&G (ADF&G 2010c). From 2001–2010, there was an average of 42 calves:100 cows, which is above State management objectives (Toby and Kellyhouse 2007, ADF&G 2008, Schwanke 2011). From 2010-2016, an average of 40 calves:100 cows were counted during fall composition surveys (Schwanke 2011, Robbins 2016, pers. comm.).

Between 2001 and 2008, the bull:cow ratio was below the State management objective with an average of 32 bulls:100 cows. The lowest bull:cow ratio was in 2006/2007 with 23 bulls:100 cows. The average bull:cow ratio from 2008 to 2015 was 46:100 (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Nelchina caribou fall composition counts and estimated herd size, regulatory years 2001-2016 (Tobey and Kelleyhouse 2007, ADF&G 2008, Schwanke 2011, Schwanke and Robbins 2013, Robbins 2015, 2016, pers. comm.)

Regulatory Year	Total bulls: 100 cows	Calves: 100 cows	Calves (%)	Cows (%)	Total bulls (%)	Composition Sample size	Total Adults	Post calving count ^a
2001-2002	37	40	22	57	21	3,949	26,159	35,106
2002-2003	31	48	27	56	17	1,710	25,161	35,939
2003-2004	31	35	21	60	19	3,140	23,786	31,114
2004-2005	31	45	26	57	17	1,640	27,299	38,961
2005-2006	36	41	23	57	20	3,263	28,071	36,993
2006-2007	24 ^b	48 ^b	25	61	14	3,300	NA	N/A
2007-2008	34	35	21	59	20	3,027	26,124	33,744
2008-2009	39	40	22	56	22	3,378	NA	N/A
2009-2010	42	29	17	58	25	3,076	28,198	33,146
2010-2011	64	55	25	46	29	5,474	33,646	44,954
2011-2012	58	45	22	49	29	3,907	32,404	40,915
2012-2013	57	31	16	54	30	5,249	43,386	46,496
2013-2014	30	19	13	67	20	4,256		40,121
2014-2015	42	45	24	54	22	5,079		-
2015-2016	36	45	25	55	20	5,855		48,700

Subsistence

The State extended the Nelchina Basin caribou (CC001, RC566, and DC485) hunt season by 10 days from Sept. 21 – 30, 2016 by Emergency Order 04-08-16 (ADF&G 2016) due to the lack of accessibility to caribou by hunters as a result of delayed migration. As of September 27, 2016, approximately 70 caribou had been harvested by Federally qualified subsistence users, while in a normal year, the Federal subsistence harvest would be in the hundreds. The harvest numbers are approximate, as there is a five day reporting requirement. Hunting pressure from roads and trails has pushed the NCH into more remote areas in Unit 13.

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Glennallen Field Office

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