

BLM Report to the Eastern Interior RAC for the October 2022 Meeting,

Eastern Interior Field Office (EIFO), September 13, 2022.

Fortymile Caribou Update:

In June, EIFO consulted with NPS Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADFG), the EIRAC chair, and Tetlin Refuge in the process of setting the Federal subsistence fall season. ADFG reported continued declining or low 3-yr old parturition rates, calf weights, and survival, and shared that they intended to set a harvest limit of one bull, with a significantly reduced quota. This long-term trend of lowering indices of nutritional condition, heavy snows in the previous winter, and the heavy harvest of cows during the previous several seasons supported aligning the harvest with the bulls-only harvest in the state hunt. Federal harvest opportunity would be supported by the extended season dates (opening Aug 1 and an intention to leave the season open through end of September) and by a two bull harvest limit.

ADFG completed the first photocensus of the herd since 2017 and obtained a preliminary estimate of approximately 40,000 caribou prior to the beginning of the State Hunt. This is less than half of the 2017 photocensus estimate of 84,000. In consideration of this, ADFG set the harvest quota to 900 for the fall season (1200 for the year) with a harvest limit of one bull. ADFG hopes to have a final population estimate from the photocensus prior to the winter season opening in late October, at which time the winter season quota could be adjusted.

RC867

State regulations: August 10-Sept. 30, 1 bull.

Federal subsistence regulations: August 1-Sept. 30, 2 bulls.

GPS radio collar locations showed that much of the Fortymile herd arrived in the vicinity of the Steese Highway in late July. Most did not cross the Steese Highway and began to move back to the southeast by August 1, leaving little harvest opportunity and very few caribou were harvested prior to the State opening on August 10. Most of the harvest to date has occurred in the Taylor Highway area, primarily in the Chicken Ridge Trail area.

Reported harvest as of September 12:

Zones 1 and 4 (Steese area), 62. Zone 2, 78. And Zone 3 (Taylor area), 401. Total harvest, 541.

Fortymile/Taylor Highway Weed Control

EIFO funded and assisted with work by the Salcha-Delta Soil and Water Conservation District to inventory and control invasive plants along the Taylor and Top of the World highways. Manual control (focused on bird vetch and white sweetclover and largely by hand pulling) was conducted on 1.8 acres at 14 sites, from Mile three on the Taylor Highway to Eagle.

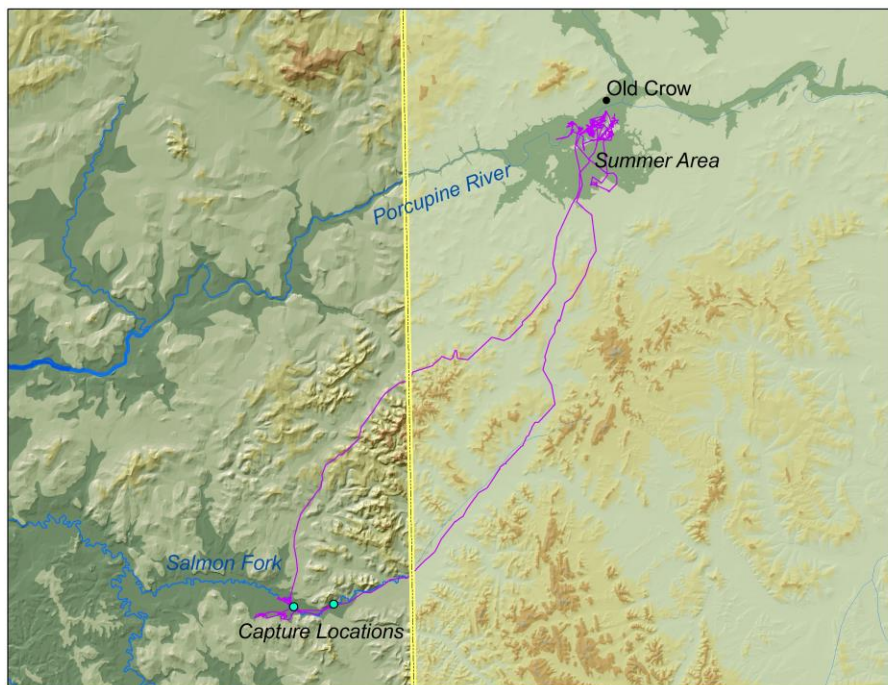
Draanjik Moose Project.

This project is in collaboration with similar projects conducted by Yukon-Charley Preserve and Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Eighteen adult female moose were captured and outfitted with GPS collars in

March 2022, in the Grayling Fork, Bull Creek, and Salmon Fork areas, bringing the total collared moose to 28. Due to heavy snowpack in the March capture period, moose were predominantly located along rivers. In May, many of the moose shifted their range to areas with wetlands, primarily moving towards Yukon Flats. However, two cows captured on the Salmon Fork travelled approximately 90 miles northeast to the Porcupine River near the village of Old Crow, Yukon. Calving was documented for one of these cows. Two other cows moved from the Salmon Fork or Grayling Fork into the headwaters of the Fishing Branch River in the Yukon, and summered there at nearly alpine elevations. These movements, along with some interchange with moose on the Yukon River in Yukon-Charley Preserve, demonstrate the large-scale connections among moose in this region.

GPS and aerial monitoring indicated that the average parturition date was May 22 (which was two days later than the previous year) but the parturition rate was higher (89% in 2022 and 70% in 2021). Twinning rates were 35% in 2022 and 28% in 2021. Interestingly, average parturition dates were nearly the same in the three study areas, despite large differences in latitude.

Figure 1. Spring movements of two cow moose collared on the Salmon Fork and traveling to the Porcupine River near Old Crow.



Steese and White Mountains Travel Management Plans Completed

The Travel and Transportation Management Plans for the Steese and White Mountains planning areas will be signed in mid-October and will go into effect on October 15 for the winter travel season.

Winter changes relative to previous management are minimal. Except for a few non-motorized routes and limitations on snow depth in Research Natural Areas, all BLM-managed lands in the planning areas

will be open to cross-country snowmachine travel. A total of 119 miles of additional designated winter routes are identified for development subject to funding and resource availability.

Summer changes are diverse and attempt to provide for the wide range of recreation experiences sought by public land users in the area, from non-motorized experiences to jeep-sized OHVs in some areas. In portions of the White Mountains and much of the Steese NCA, summer OHV travel will be limited to designated routes. Most areas in the White Mountains which currently allow summer OHV use will continue to allow cross-country travel. In the Steese NCA, Areas where caribou harvest is highest (based on information provided by ADF&G) will allow for larger OHVs on designated routes and off-route game retrieval using OHVs. A total of 37 miles of additional designated summer routes are identified for development subject to funding and resource availability.

BLM will develop and distribute maps and informational tools over the winter and will place permanent signage next summer to help users understand the new travel management plans. The plans also provide for monitoring of route usage, resource impacts, and user conflicts to inform an adaptive management strategy to address areas where adjustments are needed. Actions in response to monitoring results may include route hardening, re-routing, adjustment of allowed vehicle sizes, or temporary or seasonal closure.

Ikeenjik Watershed Management Plan

BLM is currently working on watershed management Plan for the Ikeenjik River (formerly Birch Creek) to identify and characterize stakeholder concerns throughout the watershed. This is a step-down plan that was identified in the Steese Resource Management plan and will be used to inform development of a Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP) for the Birch Creek Wild and Scenic River corridor. Currently we are working with the contractor EMPSi to collect information that will be used to develop and analyze the plan. We have also received public comment that will be used to develop the plan. We expect public scoping for the CRMP to begin in early 2023.

Beaver Creek 10-year water rights review

The state of Alaska has initiated a 10-year review of BLM water rights for Beaver creek. BLM has provided information requested by the state of Alaska for this review process. The state is in the process of reviewing data provided by BLM to determine if this water right is still valid.

Nome Creek stream channel rehabilitation and road upgrades

BLM has received funding to upgrade Nome Creek road in the White Mountains NRA and to conduct Nome Creek stream restoration on a portion of Nome Creek that was impacted by past mining. The road upgrade project will put a 6-inch gravel lift along the entire road and repair some culvert issues along the road. The Nome Creek stream restoration project will be focused on the section from the Nome Creek bridge to about ¼ mile up stream of the bridge. BLM is in the early stages of developing this project. As part of this project a gravel pit will be developed to provide material for the road upgrade and for future maintenance of the road.