

History of Denali Wildlife Buffer Issue

Rick Steiner, Nov. 1, 2019

Given the Alaska Board of Game Chairman's Oct. 25, 2019 response to citizens' Oct. 2019 Denali buffer emergency petition, telling citizens to "back off and be patient and let the process work," with respect, below is a summary clarifying how the Denali wildlife buffer process has "worked."

1917 – McKinley Park established, northeast wildlife area ("Wolf Townships") not included due to mining interests.

1922 – Alaska railroad proposes inclusion of Wolf Townships in McKinley Park to protect park wildlife. **No action taken.**

1965 – After statehood, state selects Wolf Townships lands, but cites need to expand park boundary to protect caribou and states that existing park boundary is "an arbitrary line." **No action taken.**

1969 – Pres. Lyndon Johnson considers adding Wolf Townships to the park. **No action taken.**

1978 – Wolf Townships found worthy for inclusion in proposed Denali National Monument, but lands had been selected by State. **No action taken.**

1980 – ANILCA Senate Committee cites need to bring these lands into Park in future land exchange to protect park wildlife. **No action taken.**

1985 – State proposes bringing Wolf Townships into national park in exchange for Kantishna/Dunkle Mine being excluded from park. **No action taken.**

Nov. 1992 – First Denali wolf buffer established by Alaska Board of Game (BOG), covering approx. 800 mi² along entire eastern boundary of park (largest to-date).

Jan. 1993 – In retaliation for Gov. Walter Hickel's suspension of some wolf control programs elsewhere in Alaska, **Denali buffer eliminated by the Board of Game two months later.**

Nov. 2000 – Board of Game reestablishes small, approx. 29 mi², buffer in western Stampede Trail/Wolf Townships, but wolf take remains significant.

Feb. 2001 – Gov. Tony Knowles proposes to transfer Stampede Trail/Wolf Townships (including buffer area) to the University of Alaska, to then sell to

National Park Service, generating revenue for the university and bringing Wolf Township/Stampede Trail into the national park. **Legislature declines.**

May 2001 – Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADFG) proposes to enlarge buffer to 72 mi². **Board of Game approves.**

Oct. 2008 – Independent Alaska biologists petition ADFG Commissioner to use emergency authority to enlarge buffer to over 300 mi², as mortality of eastern Denali wolves remained high, with 19 killed along the boundary in two successive years. **Commissioner declines.**

Nov. 2008 – Independent biologists petition Denali National Park to close wolf take on some of its lands inside Denali. **National Park Service declines.**

Mar. 2010 – Wolf viewing success in the park at 45%, but significant wolf mortality continues despite the existing small buffer in place for 10 years. Several proposals submitted to BOG to expand the buffer. **Board of Game declines all proposals, eliminates buffer entirely, imposes a 6-year moratorium on considering any further Denali buffer proposal.**

May 2012 – Grant Creek pregnant female killed in trap baited with dead horse along park boundary, Grant Creek group (formerly often seen by park visitors), fails to den or pup, and disintegrates that summer. **Grant Creek group declines from 15 members to 3, and wolf viewing success declines from 21% to 12%.**

Sept. 2012 – In response to loss of Grant Creek group from trapping kill of the pregnant female, Alaska conservation groups submit Emergency Petition to BOG to reestablish Denali buffer. **Board of Game declines.**

Oct. 2012 – Alaska petitioners ask for reconsideration of BOG denial of Sept. emergency buffer petition. **Board of Game declines.** Petitioners submit new emergency Denali buffer petition. **Board of Game declines.**

Jan. 2013 – Citizens request BOG to rescind its Denali buffer moratorium. **Board of Game declines.**

2010–2016 – Citizens ignore BOG Denali buffer moratorium, submit additional buffer proposals. **Board of Game declines citizen proposals.**

Dec. 2014 – Citizens petition new ADFG Commissioner to use emergency authority to close Denali buffer. **Commissioner declines.**

Feb. 2015 – Citizens submit emergency petition to BOG to close the area. **Board of Game declines.** Citizens ask ADFG Commissioner to close the area. **Commissioner declines.**

2015–2016 – NPS research (Borg et.al.) confirms observed breeder loss effect, where the disintegration of wolf family groups can follow the loss of a significant breeding wolf (as with Grant Creek in 2012); and confirmed that in years with the small buffer in place, visitor viewing success of wolves in the park was greater.

May 2015 – Two wolves from long-studied East Fork (Toklat) group, one likely a breeder, killed at a bear bait station in Stampede trail, and **East Fork group declines from 14 to 4 members that year.**

May 2015 – With only weeks left in season, **Commissioner agrees to emergency closure of further trapping/hunting in area, but only *after* the significant loss to the East Fork group.** Wolf viewing success drops to 5%.

Aug. 2015 – Citizens again petition Denali National Park to close wolf take on its lands, including the Preserve and Park additions. **National Park Service declines.**

Dec. 2015 – Citizens again ask the Commissioner to use emergency authority to close the buffer area. **Commissioner declines.**

2013-2016 – Alaskans propose trade between USDO I and state for a permanent Denali buffer (conservation easement) to be established by the state in exchange for a like-valued federal easement granted to the state. Citizens online petition requesting USDO I and State of Alaska to make a Denali buffer deal gains over 370,000 signatures from around the world. But with Trump election in Nov. 2016, **proposal is dropped.**

Jan. 2016 – NPS submits Agenda Change Request to BOG for Mar. 2016 meeting, proposing to move closure date for wolf hunting in Wolf Townships/Stampede Trail six weeks earlier (from May 31 to Apr 15) to prevent overlap with bear baiting in area, but leaving trapping season unchanged. **Board of Game approves.**

Mar. 2016 – Citizens again petition ADFG Commissioner to establish emergency buffer. **Commissioner declines.**

May 2016 – Another East Fork male killed in Stampede, its mate dens and has two pups, but they all quickly disappear - last sighting of the mother and pups was June 26. The pups are assumed to have died, as it would have been difficult for a lone mother to feed, protect, and care for pups. Long-studied **East Fork family group disappears.**

Aug. 2016 – Fairbanks North Star Borough adopts resolution calling on Governor to establish Denali buffer to protect wolves, bears, and wolverines. **Governor declines to act.**

Spring 2017 - Alaska House of Representatives passes HB105 to establish Denali wolf buffer of approx. 500 mi². Despite overwhelming public testimony in support to the State Senate, in 2018 the **buffer bill dies in Senate Resources Committee**.

2010-present – Alaskans continue to propose non-consumptive representatives for appointment to BOG, none are put forward by Governor. Despite the Alaska constitutional requirement that wildlife be managed on behalf of *all* citizens, the BOG remains comprised solely of consumptive-use representatives, a minority constituency in Alaska. Independent research shows that the chance of a consumptive-use (trapping/hunting) proposal being adopted by the BOG is more than 5-times greater than a non-consumptive (conservation) proposal being adopted.

2017 - As the **Board of Game declined all proposals to reestablish or expand Denali buffer since 2001**, Alaskans request that Gov. Bill Walker administratively establish the buffer through executive authority as a Special Use Area or State Recreation Area. Governor Walker agrees, administrative proposal is developed.

2018 - Governor changes his mind, and the **Governor declines**.

March 2018 - Citizens again petition ADFG Commissioner to establish buffer by emergency order. **Commissioner declines**.

Spring 2018 - Riley Creek group frequently seen along the park road the previous year, contributes to an increase in visitor viewing success to 17%; collared Riley Creek male killed in former buffer area, and **Riley Creek group declines from 17 to 6**.

Apr. 2018 - With only a few weeks left in the trapping season, **Commissioner agrees to enact emergency closure of buffer, but only after losses to Riley Creek and Comb groups**.

Jun. 2018 - Opinion poll of Alaskans, conducted by Remington Research Group, shows overwhelming support for a Denali buffer to protect wolves, bears, lynx and wolverines on state lands along the boundary of the park — 54% in favor, 37% opposed, 9% undecided.

Nov. 2018 – Alaskans again petition ADFG Commissioner to establish buffer by emergency order. **Commissioner declines**.

July 2019 – In-season survey by Denali bus drivers reports the chance of seeing wolves at historic low, “not quite nonexistent, but pretty close.” As a result, citizens again petition ADFG Commissioner and BOG to use emergency authority to establish Denali buffer before opening of hunting Aug. 10. **Commissioner and Board of Game decline emergency proposals**.

Oct. 2019 – Denali National Park reports the lowest wolf viewing success on record during 2019 season – 1%. The 2019 decline was due in part to natural factors, but in significant part due to cumulative losses from continued hunting/trapping along the park boundary since the buffer was removed in 2010. By comparison at Yellowstone wolf viewing success averages 70%, and supports a \$35 million/year economy. Noting the recent decline in Denali visitor numbers and spending, Alaska citizens again petition ADFG Commissioner and BOG to use emergency authority to close the Denali buffer prior to scheduled Nov. 1 opening of trapping. **Commissioner and Board of Game decline emergency proposals.**

Oct. 2019 - In final effort to have the BOG convene an emergency meeting to consider the petition prior to scheduled opening of trapping, **over 11,000 public comments were sent to the BOG in just two weeks.** In response, BOG Chair tells Alaska citizens advocating the emergency petition: **“You need to back off and be patient and let the process work.”**

Nov. 2019 – Trapping opens at Denali on state lands and within most of Denali National Park & Preserve.
