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Climate changes likely mixed for Alaska's moose, expert says

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Posted: Wednesday, May 21, 2014 12:26 am | Updated: 12:26 pm, Wed May 21, 2014.

Jeff Richardson / jr Richardson@newsminer.com

FAIRBANKS — The decades ahead could be chaotic ones for Alaska's moose population, with the potential for shifting habitat, warmer temperatures and the introduction of deadly new parasites, according to University of Alaska Fairbanks analysis.

Kris Hundertmark, an associate professor of wildlife ecology at UAF, said this century is likely to include dramatic changes for Alaska's iconic ungulate. He presented his research during a presentation on Tuesday with the Alaska Center for Climate Assessment & Policy.

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It's hard to determine whether moose will emerge better or worse, but Hundertmark said it's almost certain to be a challenging era for them.

"In the end, as scientists are often fond of saying, it's complicated," he said.

Hundertmark's projections are built on "middle of the road" warming scenarios this century by UAF's Scenarios Network for Alaska & Arctic Planning. Those forecasts are based on rising global

greenhouse gas emissions, which most scientists believe are the primary driver of modern climate change.

Under those scenarios, Fairbanks would have a roughly 11 degree mean-temperature increase in January between this decade and the end of the century, along with about a 6-degree July mean-temperature increase.

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That could have big implications for moose and their habitat, as their food sources, habitat and foes go through rapid changes.

Hundertmark admits that tracking a few large species is a simplified analysis of habitat change but said it provides an accessible way to discuss the subject.

"Some species will do better than others in a climate-change scenario," he said.

Scientists have previously predicted that the "shrubification" of the North Slope and other grassy areas will benefit moose populations, as willows and alders expand their range in Alaska. But, Hundertmark said, other substantial changes are also likely that could make moose a less decisive winner.


Warmer temperatures could also bring pests north — the winter tick, which has plagued Lower 48 moose populations, has seen its range creep farther north in recent decades. It's now at Interior Alaska latitudes in parts of Canada, he said.

The expected hotter temperatures in both winter and summer could also be bad for moose, who have higher mortality rates when experiencing heat stress.


Lower snowfall could slow wolf predation on moose, however, since those predators are most effective when hunting moose that are wallowing in deep snow. Warm weather should also increase the likelihood of forest fires, which could lead to a shift from coniferous forests to moose-friendly deciduous habitat.

"As we move forward, we're realizing everything is interrelated in the ecosystem, and we need to take a more holistic approach," Hundertmark said.

Contact staff writer Jeff Richardson at 459-7518. Follow him on Twitter: @FDNMBusiness.



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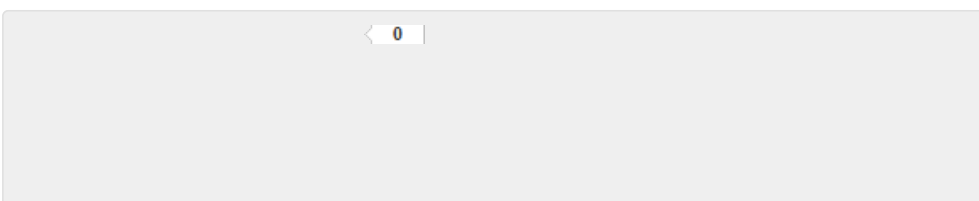
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