Moose hunts fairly stable, study finds

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FAIRBANKS — Contrary to hunters’ tales of good or bad moose seasons, Jennifer Schmidt says the number of successful hunts has been relatively stable since 1990.

Schmidt, a researcher at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, presented her study, “Statewide Trends of Alaska Moose Hunters and Hunts” at the American Association for the Advancement of Science Arctic Division’s Arctic Science Conference on Wednesday.

Analysis of moose harvest tags from 1990 to 2006 revealed an average success rate of 32 percent. It also revealed non-resident hunters spent the most time out on hunting trips, followed by rural hunters and then hunters from urban areas.

Schmidt said the time could be determined by different factors for each group. Nonresident hunters have probably planned to come to the state mainly for the hunt and set a certain number of days for their trip, while rural hunters have easier access to hunting grounds, and they can hunt more often. Urban hunters are hindered by their jobs and other obligations, Schmidt said.
The data found a correlation between a hunt’s success and the distance traveled. On average, hunters who traveled farther were more successful. Hunters from Barrow, Juneau and Seward went the farthest. Anchorage and Fairbanks hunters also logged in a good number of miles. From 2001 to 2006, hunting distances have stayed steady, but Schmidt said gas prices could affect this year’s travel distance.

She was also able to track hunting methods through the tags. The most popular method was highway hunting, where hunters prowl the roadway system for a kill. But it was also the most unsuccessful method. The most successful methods were by recreational vehicles such as snowmachines and four-wheelers or horse and dog teams, although the popularity of the vehicles is rising while the use of horses and dogs is decreasing.

Schmidt said the database included some assumptions and biases. The tags did not allow hunters to state if they used more than one method of transportation during their hunt. She also said things such as hunters rounding the number of days on their hunt has an effect on the data.

But while moose harvests have remained stable, the possibility of rabies incidents may be on the rise.

Erich Follman, a professor at UAF, presented his work on the rabies virus, foxes and the increased chance of human interaction.

According to the lecture’s abstract, rabies outbreaks occur every 3 to 4 years, but two factors could lead to increased numbers. The reduced sea ice restricts the fox movements on ice and increases their movement on land, forcing them closer to
humans. Secondly the northward expansion of red foxes could increase the number of foxes with rabies because they are more susceptible to rabies than arctic foxes.

Human rabies cases are rare in Alaska. Only three cases have been reported in the state’s history, with the last case taking place in 1943. Those three cases were caused by wolves or sled dogs.

Although there have been no fox-to-human rabies case, dogs and other companion animals could have direct contact with foxes.

Follman said foxes are scavengers and are attracted to research stations, whale butchering sites, beached whales and industrial sites.

Fox behavior and Arctic climate change could have much wider effects. As seals and foxes interact more as sea ice disappears, he wondered if rabies could spread to polar bears and other species.