Statehood changed wildlife management for Alaska

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This is part of a five-part series the News-Miner has produced in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Alaska statehood. Through Monday, the News-Miner will publish memories of that momentous event, a glance back at where we were, and a look ahead at what the next 50 years might bring.

FAIRBANKS — The arrival of statehood in Alaska marked the start of a different era in fish and game management for the 49th state.

Predator control and strict wildlife law enforcement in the Interior were replaced by biological research and liberalized fish and game seasons soon after Alaska became a state on Jan. 3, 1959.
“Here you had trained biologists being hired for the first time,” said Dave Klein, a retired wildlife biology professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who worked for the federal government before statehood and the state government afterward.

“Previous to that the main fish and wildlife agents were game wardens and predator control people and a few waterfowl biologists.”

Klein, 81, was one of many biologists to make the switch from federal to state management. Klein, who attended graduate school at UAF from 1951-53, worked as a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist for five years in Southeast Alaska before taking a job with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in 1959. Klein could see the writing on the wall.

“I didn’t want to leave Alaska so I went to work for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game,” said Klein, who spent three years working for the state in Petersburg and Juneau before returning to teach at UAF. “They hired a lot of graduates from UAF. I was one of them.”

Bud Burris was another. He hired on at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in Fairbanks in 1961 after graduating from UAF, two years after statehood.

“One of my first assignments in the winter of 1961-62 was traveling the Yukon, Kobuk and Noatak rivers to find out what people were doing as far as game was concerned,” Burris said. “What we found out was people were necessarily hunting out of season. The federal seasons were so restrictive they couldn’t get the meat they needed.

“We began a process of liberalizing seasons on moose to fit what the local people
needed and the population could sustain,” he said, noting that the state implemented cow moose hunts and winter seasons. “We were faced with an abundance of moose and caribou in several areas. We had enough so that we didn’t need to put a limit on the taking of females.”

A big reason for the surplus of game was predator control efforts by federal agents in the 1940s and 50s. Prior to statehood, most federal game management consisted of killing wolves to keep the number moose and caribou up.

“Up until that time the general feeling of the predator- and rodent-control people was the only good wolf is a dead wolf,” Klein said.

Halting predator control

One of the first things the Legislature did after statehood was stop predator control. The use of poison, which was used to kill wolves but also killed other animals such as bears, foxes and wolverines, was banned. It was common practice for federal agents to drop poison baits for wolves from airplanes and plant “getters,” a pipe loaded with a poison-filled cartridge, in wolf country. The pipe was driven into the ground and baited with a scented tuft of wool attached to the cartridge. When a wolf or another animal pulled on the bait, the cartridge fired a lethal dose of poison into the animal’s mouth.

“There was a lot of poisoning going on,” Burris said at the time of statehood. “Some people were still finding getters down in the Fortymile country 10 years after statehood.”
While a $50 bounty on wolves wasn’t eliminated until 1970 and the state still allowed aerial hunting of wolves until the Airborne Hunting Act was passed in 1972, the state focused mainly on population dynamics rather than predator control, Klein said.

Another major difference between federal and state management was enforcement.

Dave Lanni, 78, was game warden for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and a U.S. Marshall for five years in Fairbanks before transferring to work as Fairbanks’ first state wildlife enforcement officer in 1959. While enforcement was at the top of the priority list for the feds, he said, it was near the bottom for the state.

“That’s why we had so much game in the ‘60s,” he said. “We had predator control, and we had good enforcement.”

Federal agents ran road patrols almost constantly and checked “hot spots” for illegal hunting and fish activity, such as the Little Salcha River, Shaw Creek and the Steese Highway where the Fortymile Caribou Herd crossed the road.

“We used to have game enforcement stations along Taylor Highway, on the Richardson, up on the Steese; we patrolled those during the seasons,” Lanni said. “We would physically check and sign their licenses if they got an animal. They in turn went through the check stations and they were checked again. People behaved because they had to. They knew the only one way down that road was through a check station.”

That all changed when biologists with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game took over in 1959, Lanni said.
“They were pro management. They didn’t care about enforcement,” he said.

Tense times for management

During the early years of statehood, there was open animosity displayed on both sides during the transition from a federal to state management.

“The fellows I worked with in the federal service wouldn’t even speak to me when I went over to the state,” Lanni recalled.

In the year or two leading up to statehood and the year or two after, there was considerable politics involved.

“Everybody was jockeying for power and position,” said Lanni, who spent only two years working for the state before leaving to start his own business. “It was total chaos. It was a real blow to me when all the political crap started and I didn’t know how to play the game.

“When I worked for the feds you did your job, you wore the badge and you were proud of it,” Lanni said. “It wasn’t like that when I worked for the state.”

Fairbanks master guide Chuck Gray said the change in philosophies between the federal and state regimes was evident.

“Enforcement was a big thing in (pre-statehood) days and it went to almost zero with statehood,” he said. “Biological studies was a big thing in the early days of statehood.”

Prior to statehood, hunting, fishing and trapping seasons were composed by state
game commissioners in conjunction with U.S. Fish and Wildlife administrators in Juneau, Gray said. Local residents had little say in formulating fish and game decisions.

That changed after statehood when the Legislature created the 10-member state Board of Fish and Game, which was later split into separate boards that exist today.