

Worried Russian region targets wolves in big three-month hunt

Tue Jan 15, 2013 10:57am EST

MOSCOW, Jan 15 (Reuters) - It's open season on wolves across a wide swathe of Siberia.

Worried about attacks by wolves that are devouring reindeer in increasing numbers, the leader of Russia's vast Sakha Republic issued a decree on Tuesday initiating a three-month hunt targeting the predators.

The goal is to bring the wolf population of the India-sized region also known as Yakutia down from more than 3,500 to the "optimal number" of about 500, Russia's official gazette, Rossiyskaya Gazeta, reported.

"The population is more concerned than ever about mass wolf attacks on farm animals," the paper quoted Sakha President Yegor Borisov as saying at a recent regional government meeting. "We must determine a clear plan of action."

In the resulting decree, Borisov announced the start of a three-month campaign of "special measures for regulating the quantity of wolves" in Sakha, which stretches north of the Arctic Circle and has fewer than 1 million people.

Domesticated reindeer are part of a way of life for many who herd them, eat their meat and use them for transportation.

The decree contains few details and suggests plans for the hunt were still in progress as it began, but it recommends local governments declare states of emergency and urges industrial and transportation [enterprises](#) to back the hunt.

That means hunting brigades will be provided with ammunition, spare parts and fuel to get around the region, where roads are scarce, state broadcaster Vesti reported.

There will also be monetary rewards for each wolf shot and three prizes of about 1 million roubles (\$33,000) each for the top hunters, Vesti said. Officials in Sakha, six hours ahead of Moscow, could not immediately be reached for comment.

According to Vesti, wolves killed 16,111 domesticated reindeer and 313 domesticated horses last year, costing herders a total of about 150 million roubles (\$5 million) in losses.

Rossiyskaya Gazeta said the number of reindeer killed by wolves in Sakha was about four times that of 2006, and that hunters in the region killed 730 wolves last year.

"NORMAL HUMAN RESPONSE"

Wolf attacks on domesticated reindeer have increased because of a decrease in the numbers of the hares and possibly other animals the predators eat, including wild reindeer, said Vladimir Krever, coordinator of the biodiversity protection programme at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Russia.

Numbers of hares and other animals fluctuate naturally as a result of many factors including weather and die-offs that occur after populations grow too large to be sustainable, Krever said.

He said the effort to kill more wolves in Sakha this year was the result of the natural ebb and flow of wildlife populations and would not pose a serious threat to the wolf population.

"When wolves can't get enough food in the wild, they begin to cause losses to herds - in the European part of Russia this is cows and sheep, in Yakutia it is domesticated reindeer."

"To minimise losses to predators is a completely normal human response in such a situation", he said. "There's nothing terrible about this."

But he expressed doubt that hunters would bring the population down to 500 even with additional financial and material support, noting that traps and the use of aviation are prohibited. "To shoot that many wolves is unrealistic", he said.

Some activists blamed humans who hunt hares for the increase in attacks on domesticated reindeer, according to independent online local news agency Novy Region.

"The reason for this is the unregulated and continuous hunting of hares," the agency cited a petition it said was circulated by activists as saying.

The petition urged Sakha authorities to call off the hunt and criticised monetary rewards, saying shooting wolves "is hardly a heroic act", the agency quoted the petition as saying.

Whatever the other obstacles, hunters will face freezing cold temperatures in the giant region. The forecast high on Wednesday in Yakutsk, the regional capital, was -45 C (-49 F). (\$1 = 30.2405 Russian roubles)

Writing by Steve Gutterman; Editing by [Jon Boyle](#)

Source : <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/15/russia-wolves-hunt-idUSL6N0AK5J020130115>