

Alaska's plan to hold aerial wolf hunt draws fire

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Alaska's plan to shoot hundreds of gray wolves from helicopters this winter has put the state's \$1 billion-a-year tourism industry in the cross hairs.

Several environmental groups in the lower 48 states said Monday they would start pushing a boycott of Alaska tourism, the state's third-largest industry in terms of jobs, behind the military and seafood processing.

"We're trying to convince officials with authority to reverse this policy," said Priscilla Feral, president of the Connecticut-based animal rights group Friends of Animals.

"So we're talking money — a language (the state) will understand."

In San Francisco on Monday, about 10 protesters chanted, "Save the wolf — boycott Alaska," and passed out leaflets outside a travel agency that books cruises to Alaska.

Last week, Alaska's Board of Game approved a hotly debated plan to kill 300 or more gray wolves — up to 80 percent — in two areas of the eastern interior early next year to enlarge moose and caribou herds.

Conservationists said they believe the wolves, which are extinct in most parts of the nation but are considered numerous in Alaska, are being killed to improve conditions for caribou and moose hunters.

The Department of Fish and Game acknowledges that

hunters would benefit but says a boost in the number of moose and caribou also could create an "American Serengeti" for wildlife watchers that would boost tourism.

The industry injects about \$1.1 billion into Alaska's economy annually and \$52 million into state coffers in the form of taxes, fees and state-run ferry operations, a recent study found.

State tourism groups have been distancing themselves from the controversy.

"I think the effort to manage wildlife shouldn't be associated with the effort to attract visitors," said Tina Lindgren, executive director of the Alaska Tourism Marketing Council.

"But the (Fish and Game) comments about tourism

were widely reported, and that's what's put tourism right in the middle."

The council, which gets 85 percent of its funding from the state, neither favored nor opposed the shooting plan. "But if we get many people considering canceling their vacations in Alaska, we may change our position," she said.

She focused on the plan's positive side — a ban on wolf hunting and trapping around Denali National Park and Preserve, Alaska's leading wolf-viewing area.

Wendy Wolf, deputy director of the state Division of Tourism, said some people called to say they were changing their travel plans because of the wolf-control plan.