**Florida Approves Black Bear Hunting Criteria**

**Chad Gillis and Anne Reed, *The News-Press***

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Bear hunting opponents tried one last time Wednesday to convince the state to halt an October hunt, but wildlife managers voted 3-2 to open the first bear hunt in Florida in more than two decades.

Commissioner Ron Bergeron, an extensive hunter and outdoorsman, dissented and said the problem is mismanaged garbage, not bears.

"I've been concerned as this train moves so rapidly," Bergeron said. "When you have an issue of this magnitude and you don't have all of your stock assessments in place and all of the science, I'm definitely against the hunt and I'm against any quota at this point."

The issue has become prominent locally in recent days as bears have rumbled through garbage in the Bella Terra community in Estero.

Bears often use the community as a wildlife corridor but occasionally, one stays. The bear that is in Bella Terra traveled through a conservation areas and was spotted on Torre Del Lago Street on Monday morning before travelling back through the conservation area to Ardore Lane, where it entered an open garage, removed trash, and consumed the trash in the side yard. FWC officers responded, and a trap was set on the side of the home on Ardore Lane later that morning.

The bear was sighted again by several residents on Tuesday, which was recycling day, and then on Wednesday, the bear was in the back of the community and helping itself to the garbage residents placed curbside  for Waste Management.

Diane Eggeman, the spokeswoman for FWC on bear matters said the state will allow at least two days of hunting because "we believe there's a very low risk of achieving the objective within the first two days of the hunt. And we want to make sure that people felt like they had a hunting opportunity."

Biologist Mike Orlando said the hunt is based purely on science and that there are no other motives behind the fall harvest.

"The populations, when they're healthy are resilient," Abbott said, adding that it's about trying to achieve sustainability ... based on decades of science across all of North America.

FWC does not know how many bears are in Florida but estimates hover around 3,000, and the state will allow 320 of the bears to be killed by permitted hunters in October.

The state has euthanized nearly 70 bears this year, and bear report calls to FWC has increased from a few hundred to thousands each year.

FWC has some insurances against over-harvesting -- like contacting all bear permit owners at 9 p.m. whether or not hunting is allowed the next day and using social media and other outreach efforts.

The season may last seven days but can be cut short, starting day three, if the harvest goal numbers are met.

Many who spoke at the meeting were emotional, telling commissioners that they are smug and act as though they're above public will.

"Right now all the private property owners are running feeders and the bears are attracted to these feeders and hunters know that," said Evan Roussos. "All they have to do is wait for a bear to feed, drift away 100 yards and shoot it. How are you going to manage that? We Floridians don’t like what you’re doing. Understand that. Gov. Scott has upset a lot of conservative people who care about this environment."

Others offered to contribute money to an ongoing legal case that challenges the bear hunt. The suit was filed in July.

Some said the process has been rigged, that there's no way FWC commissioners would have so little respect for Florida's wildlife.

Chuck O’Neal, with Speak up Wekiva Inc., said he fears the state will not be able to control the number of bears killed because all dead bears may not be reported and more than the desired 320 could be killed in one day.

"During the first 48 hours the number of bears that can be killed will be unlimited. No one will be called off on the first two days," O'Neal said. "This is not a limited hunt. This hunt is not based on peer reviewed studies. It’s based on junk science."

Bear-proof trash containers can reduce human-bear conflicts by 95 percent, research shows, but there are about 1.6 million Florida households in close proximity to core bear populations. That means 1.6. million or so bear-proof trash cans would be needed to curb the conflicts, and the state still need to educate homeowners and the general public on how to live safely with bears and other large wildlife.

Jon Ullman from Sierra Club said he thinks the real issue is that FWC commissioners, many of whom are large land owners, want to weaken regulations aimed at protected wildlife and habitat from sprawl.

"This is about development," Ullman said. "Its' very clear what's going on here. People say this doesn't make sense, if you look at the financial situation, it makes sense for some people."

Black bears were on the state protected animal list less than three years ago, but the state will now allow 320 to be taken by hunters this fall. The state wants the overall death rates for black bears to be about 20 percent. That number includes natural deaths, road kills and other methods of mortality.

Most states (32 out of 41) that have black bears allow annual hunts.

There are seven primary ranges in Florida, and each region will be managed differently. FWC says the goal is to reduce the population by 20 percent, although the exact number of bears living in any of the ranges is not known.

More bears could be hunted in Southwest Florida next year as the state has appealed to Big Cypress National Preserve in hopes the agency will allow bear hunting there next year.

Permits cost $100 for Florida residents (with no limit to the number of sales regardless of how many bears can be taken), which would generate $1 million if 10,000 Floridians buy a permit. About 2,000 permits were sold as of Wednesday.

The limit for this hunt is one bear per hunter. Hunters may not use dogs or bait to chase or lure bears, although many hunters have asked for those restrictions to be removed. Dogs can chase bears up trees or into tight crevasses, where they are easy to shoot. Bait hunting typically involves hunters placing a pile of food in an area to lure the animal and then shooting it while it's eating.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says 215,000 Floridians hunted in 2011, the year in which the most recent numbers are available. That number represents about 1 percent of the Florida population, according to census records.

Lee and Collier counties are part of the south region, which is basically all lands south of Lake Okeechobee on both coasts. Most of the bears in the south region are in Big Cypress National Preserve, which covers the eastern part of Collier County and parts of Lee, Hendry and Monroe counties.

BY THE NUMBERS

* 11,000: Bears lived in Florida before modern development
* 3,000: Today's estimated population
* 1994: Last time bear hunting was allowed
* 400: Percent increase in bear report call over the last decade
* 32: States allow bear hunting (out of 41 that have bears)

Source: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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