2015 Florida Bear Hunt Wrap-up Fact Sheet

Why and when did the 2015 bear season close?
FWC had mechanisms in place for daily monitoring of the harvest and season closure, so when the harvest approached the statewide objective of 320, FWC was prepared and stopped the hunt.

The East Panhandle and the Central bear management units (BMUs) were closed for the rest of the season beginning Sunday, Oct. 25 while the North and South BMUs were closed to hunting beginning Monday, Oct. 26.

How many bears were harvested during the 2015 Florida bear hunt?
The total harvest for the four bear management units open during the 2015 bear hunt was 298. The breakdown by Bear Management Unit is as follows:

- East Panhandle BMU = 112 bears
- Central BMU = 139 bears
- North BMU = 25 bears
- South BMU = 22 bears

While harvest was higher than expected in the East Panhandle and Central BMUs, success rates were comparable to other states with similar hunt structures and were within sustainable limits. The higher-than-expected harvest in the East Panhandle likely reflects a higher bear population in that unit and indicates that the population is significantly higher than the East Panhandle’s 2002 population estimate of 600 bears.

How did FWC set harvest objectives?
Florida black bear populations have increased greatly over recent decades. Based on rigorous scientific updates, Florida black bears number more than 3,500.

FWC took a conservative approach to setting harvest objectives, building in buffers so the number of bears harvested would stabilize growing populations. Buffers were built in to ensure a continuation of healthy bear numbers.

Updated population information for three additional BMUs is expected in 2016. In addition to updated population information for three additional BMUs (East Panhandle, West Panhandle and South), FWC also will use information from the 2015 hunt to guide management efforts in subsequent years.

How many bear permits were sold and how will those fees be used?
Bear permits were available from Aug. 3 to Oct. 23 and during that period 3,778 were sold. Bear permit sales totaled more than $376,900 and plans call for using that to help fund abatement of human/bear conflicts through comprehensive waste management efforts in Florida.
Was it legal to take females and will cubs survive?
Bears of either sex were allowed to be taken but the bear must have weighed at least 100 pounds live weight and cubs must not be present. The timing of this hunt was selected because cubs would be old enough (8 to 9 months old) to survive on their own. A peer-reviewed scientific study published in the Journal of Wildlife Management showed that cubs 5 1/2 months and older can survive on their own at similar rates as cubs with females.

What violations occurred during this hunt?
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission law enforcement officers investigated criminal violations ranging from underweight bears and taking or attempting to take bears by baiting. In addition, FWC officers addressed a few out-of-season harvests and hunters without permits. Proactive enforcement efforts are ongoing. Overall, compliance with hunting regulations was high.

What was the purpose of the hunt?
The purpose of a limited bear hunt was to stabilize Florida’s large, resilient and growing bear populations, as one part of FWC’s overall approach to managing bears. The continued growth in black bear populations means we needed to employ a range of management tools including a limited bear hunting season in four of the state’s seven bear management units.

Why is hunting an important wildlife management tool?
Regulated hunting has a long successful history of contributing to conservation in North America. It is a scientifically supported fact that bear hunting is biologically sustainable and the most effective tool for maintaining proper balance of bear populations relative to available habitat. Of the 41 states with resident bear populations, 33 of them conduct hunts and all have stable to increasing bear populations. Until this hunting season, Florida was the only state with an estimated bear population of over 600 bears that did not have a bear hunt. Across the U.S., managing wildlife populations between sustainable minimum and acceptable maximum levels is part of the legally mandated conservation responsibility of state wildlife agencies.

The hunt is just one component of FWC’s overall bear management strategy, and FWC will continue to invest much staff time and resources in efforts such as outreach and education, waste management, and removing bears that pose a threat to human safety.

How was the hunt conducted?
Florida’s bear hunt was carefully regulated. FWC rules required that every harvested bear be removed from the field and checked at an FWC-staffed check station. The bear harvest was limited through daily decisions regarding season closure, based on daily harvest totals.

Permitted hunters needed to verify with the FWC after each day of the hunt, beginning Oct. 24, whether the harvest objective (number of bears taken by hunters) in any of the BMUs has been met. Hunters learned about BMU closures in the following ways:

- Calling the Bear Hunting Hotline toll free at 844-FWC-BEAR (844-392-2327)
- Checking MyFWC.com/Hunting
• Following social media sites:
  o Facebook.com/HGM.FWC
  o Twitter.com/HuntFloridaFWC
• Email and texts were sent to those who have provided the FWC with their email address, and/or cell phone number.