

MEMORANDUM



To: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commissioners

From: Diane Eggeman, Director, Division of Hunting and Game Management

Date: June 22, 2016

Subject: Black Bear Management

Purpose:

Staff is requesting direction from the Commission on a range of options related to black bear hunting in 2016. Depending upon the Commission's direction, staff will seek approval to publish draft rule amendments to Florida Administrative Code.

Summary:

At the April 2016 Commission meeting, the Chairman asked staff to present a range of options related to black bear hunting in 2016 at the June Commission meeting, including the if, when and how options. Staff will describe possible modifications to hunting rules to improve the hunt structure, based on updated bear population information and experience with the 2015 hunt. In addition, staff will provide an overview and update on bear management and research, including population status, human-bear conflict, waste management efforts, and general ecology of black bears in Florida.

In October 2015, FWC opened 4 of the 7 bear management units (BMU) in Florida to bear hunting. 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. As bear populations grow, so do the number of bears moving in and around residential areas, resulting in increasing human-bear conflicts. FWC staff took a conservative approach to reinstating a limited bear hunt in Florida, which was scientifically based and carefully regulated to ensure the level of harvest was sustainable while achieving the goal of slowing the growth of the large bear populations. A recently completed scientific estimate of the Florida black bear population indicates there are 4,350 adult bears in the state. The new results document a large and growing black bear population, and confirm Florida's success in conserving its largest land mammal. These results show that reproduction and survival have outpaced mortality for bears in Florida. The hunt was one component of FWC's overall bear management strategy, and FWC has continued to invest time and resources in efforts such as outreach and education, waste management, and removing bears that pose a threat to human safety.

FWC is prioritizing and coordinating use of funding for improved waste management in the counties with the highest levels of human-bear conflicts. Sixty percent of newly appropriated funding must go to local governments with ordinances in place requiring residents and businesses to secure their trash. In addition, FWC has cost-shared with local governments and schools, using a grant generated by Conserve Wildlife license plate funds. Staff continues to work with stakeholders and partners to expand these measures.

Habitat conservation and connectivity is critical to ensuring that bear populations continue to thrive. FWC staff works in a number of ways on this front, including considering important bear habitats in public land management and conservation decisions as well as in permit review and commenting.

Staff Recommendation:

The staff recommendation is to continue to use hunting to slow the growth of bear populations. The new hunt format, which would begin in 2016, would be modified to increase precision and accountability. Proposed changes are based on public input, updated bear data, as well as information from the 2015 hunt. This limited hunt option would allow FWC to hold a more precise bear hunt using the data and information collected including the latest bear population science. This option also puts more restrictions on hunters who choose to participate. New restrictions would include: reducing the area open to hunting to correspond with areas of the state where human-bear conflicts are most prevalent; the prohibition of hunting a bear with any other bear present, including cubs; further restrictions on hunting near game feeding stations; limiting the number of permits; increased enforcement measures requiring hunters to tag bears immediately; and limiting the number of hunters in each area of the state, or Bear Management Unit.

Staff Contact and/or Presenter:

Dr. Thomas Eason, Director, Division of Habitat and Species Conservation
Diane Eggeman, Director, Division of Hunting and Game Management