

Background Document
Florida Black Bear Management Update
Agenda Item 5A
February 4, 2015

FWC Human-Bear Conflict Management: A Multi-pronged Approach

The FWC has a long standing approach to addressing human-bear conflicts that includes a Bear Response Plan to react quickly and effectively in emergency situations. Recent increases in human-bear conflicts and several incidents where bears have injured people have resulted in an acceleration of management actions to resolve conflict situations. FWC policy is to take a multi-pronged approach that includes: even more aggressively and proactively removing bears that pose a public safety threat, working with partners and residents to reduce or eliminate food sources that attract bears, and providing greater flexibility and additional tools for citizens to deal with conflict bears.

Removing bears that pose a public safety threat

Over the last several years, FWC response to bear conflicts and bears in neighborhoods has been evolving and the number of bears euthanized has increased. The recent unprecedented number of serious injuries to humans caused by bears (four in 13 months) has resulted in staff re-evaluating approaches and increasing efforts to reduce human-bear conflicts and protect public safety. Accordingly, even more bears that pose a public safety threat will be removed from neighborhoods by humane euthanasia. When trapping efforts are called for due to public safety threat, policy now directs staff to humanely euthanize bears that are trapped, especially in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Staff is also directed to consider specific circumstances and consult with leadership to determine if an exception to euthanasia is warranted to address the presence of cubs or other exceptional situations.

Removing bear attractants

Conflicts will not be totally eliminated and public safety cannot be assured only by removing individual bears from neighborhoods. If food attractants, specifically garbage, are not made inaccessible to bears, they will continue to venture into developed areas in close proximity to people, and conflicts and public safety risks will continue.

Accordingly, it is FWC's policy to work with partners and residents to eliminate or secure bear attractants. These efforts include:

- Partnering with counties, municipalities and homeowner associations to address securing bear attractants and garbage in targeted areas, including assisting with draft ordinances and/or securing funding to offset the cost of bear-resistant trashcans.

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- Providing technical assistance to citizens desiring to implement methods to secure or eliminate attractants.
- Providing education and outreach to inform citizens and visitors of the risks associated with bears and how to avoid conflicts and improve safety when in bear country.
- Offering bear response training to local law enforcement and first responders in areas of the State with bear issues.
- Working with the waste management industry, county and local governments to develop comprehensive area-wide use of bear-resistant trash cans and commercial waste receptacles.

Expanding citizen's options when dealing with conflict bears

It is FWC's policy to empower property owners to use all safe, reasonable, and effective methods to scare bears off of their property, which can help re-instill bears' natural fear of people and thereby reduce conflicts and threats to public safety. Under this new policy, property owners can take a variety of actions to scare bears such as using bear spray, deploying automatic water and light deterrent systems, and shooting bears with a paintball gun or slingshot. FWC guidelines and information provided to the public will list allowable methods and situations in which they might not be appropriate. This information will be developed in conjunction with our partners and stakeholders and will be posted over the next several months.

For several years, FWC has trained government agencies and private organizations in methods of hazing and scaring bears. After they have completed the training, FWC has issued them permits to allow them to independently deal with conflict bears. Staff proposes to streamline the process and reduce paperwork by no longer requiring permits to those that are trained to scare bears. These policies make the distinction between methods property owners are allowed to use to scare bears and methods members of government agencies and private organizations are allowed to do after they are trained by the FWC. Those trained can use lethal weapons (i.e. shotguns, pistols) to deploy less-than-lethal ammunition. We do not propose to allow property owners to use the same techniques as trained government representatives and specific designated groups.

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Hunting as a bear population management tool

Staff will present several ideas to the Commission at the February meeting on how hunting bears could work in Florida. These ideas will need to be fine-tuned and solidified if staff is directed to proceed with developing a hunting season. Staff thinking on how a hunt could be structured in Florida is founded on ensuring hunts would be sustainable to the population and meet management objectives. Also, staff recommend erring on the side of being conservative with harvest until we get several years of experience and data. Then, as appropriate, we could liberalize seasons. Black bear populations can sustain up to 20% mortality annually without negative effect. Therefore, staff recommend limited hunts that would contribute to an overall mortality rate of 20% or less within each Bear Management Unit. The overall mortality rate would include road mortality and removals due to conflict. Females with cubs and bears <100 pounds would be protected.

FWC has authority to charge up to \$300 for a special opportunity permit. The average cost of bear hunting in other states is approximately \$50 (range \$25-136) for in state residents and \$255 (range \$65-506) for out of state residents. Therefore, staff proposes \$100 for in state residents and \$300 for out of state residents, with proceeds going back to black bear conservation efforts. Also, staff recommends setting a one week season at first to help limit harvest to intended levels. Staff also would recommend that hunting be allowed on both private and public lands, no hunting over feed or hunting with dogs be allowed, and that there be a mandatory check-in for all harvested bears.