

FWP proposal to be amended: Black Bear Regulations

Commissioner: Brian Cebull

Date Received by Commission: January 12, 2024

Proposed Amendment: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the following amendment to the proposed 2024 and 2025 Black Bear Regulations:

1. Set a statewide spring hunting season closure for Black Bear to June 15 subject to the following conditions:
 - Any BMU that currently has a quota or sub-quota would retain it.
 - BMU 580 would adopt a female bear quota of 11 in the fall and 12 in the spring.
 - For any BMU without a quota or sub-quota, that BMU would close with regular public notice at any point AFTER May 31st if the cumulative spring harvest to that point exceeds 37% female bears.
 - Any BMU that currently has a June 15 close would remain unchanged.
2. Expand the Region 1 pilot that allowed hunters to submit extracted teeth instead of having to present a head and carcass to BMU's in Regions 2, 3, & 4. In these areas, require that each hunter submit 2 molars instead of 1. Also, successful hunters in these regions would be required to report their harvest within 48 hours to the harvest report line as currently required in Region 1 under the pilot.
3. Set the Spring Season in BMU 520 to May 1 – June 15

Requested by FWP: No

Rationale and Background:

1. A standard spring season statewide closing date of June 15 will simplify regulations, provide accommodation for variable spring weather events, and afford sustainable hunting opportunities.

Since black bear harvests are managed based on BMU/HD quotas a standardized closing date of June 15 would only remain if the quota was unfilled. Conversely the closure of BMU/HDs on June 1, when quotas are yet to be filled, is an unnecessary loss of otherwise sustainable hunting opportunity.

The limitations on the June 15 closure above were added to address concerns from the Department and ensure that the extended closure date did not result in the over-harvest of sows, especially in those areas without quotas and sub-quotas.

2. The Commission approved a pilot in Region 1 during the 2022-23 season setting process to allow hunters to extract and submit their own tooth samples instead of having to present the carcass and head to the department. Based on the success of the pilot, this practice should be expanded to regions 2, 3, and 4. As recommended by Region 1, hunters should be required to submit 2 premolar teeth instead of one to ensure good quality samples. Also, hunters who intend to mail extracted tooth samples should be educated on how to package them so they are not lost or damaged in the mail. Due to sow quotas and sub-quotas and lower bear harvest numbers, hunters who harvest bears in Regions 5, 6, & 7 would still be required to present their bears to the Department for physical inspection.

3. BMU 520 lies along the northern and eastern face of the Beartooth Mountains. BMU 520 has a female harvest quota for the Spring of 12 sows which is typically filled very early in the season. By adjusting the start date of the season from April 15 to May 1, this will allow the season to stay open incrementally longer and, hopefully, allow hunters to access more back country male bears that are unreachable due to snow in the early season.

Department response

The department does not anticipate any adverse effects to the black bear population as a result of this amendment. The department may present recommended changes to quotas for the commission's consideration in subsequent years.

Additional context from Department

Amendment 1

Females representing 37% of total harvest after May 31 is a threshold based on monitoring bear harvests in Montana. This female harvest threshold is meant to address the routine circumstance of female harvest increasing after May due primarily to their increased activity after leaving winter dens. The precision of this percent-of-total harvest approach to management decreases in regions and Bear Management Units (BMUs) with smaller populations and harvests. Consequently, BMUs with smaller populations are typically managed with quotas. With the quotas established through this portion of the amendment, the department expects that harvest will be consistent with the black bear population in the region or BMU. The department will monitor harvest closely and will have opportunity to recommend changes next year if harvest is determined to be at the level at which a population impact that is not consistent with management objectives is detected.

Amendment 2

The pilot program has thus far documented few challenges in data collection. However missing data in regions and BMUs with lower harvests can limit inference. Like sex composition in the harvest, age at harvest can be an important indicator regarding level of harvest and is an important input into population models in development. Because the regions in which the expanded program is proposed to be extended all harvest more than 200 black bears annually, the department expects that the data will be adequate to provide accurate monitoring of those black bear harvests. If needed, the department will have opportunity to recommend changes in subsequent years.

Amendment 3

The department does not anticipate any adverse biological impacts to the black bear population due to amendment 3. With later dates the potential does exist for the season to close more rapidly if more female bears are harvested.