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NJ wildlife council votes in favor of bear hunt

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press Writer

The Associated Press

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TRENTON, N.J. - New Jersey residents weary of frequent visits from bears may see a lot less of them come late fall.

New Jersey's Fish and Game Council on Tuesday voted to include the state's first black bear hunt in five years in its proposed bear management policy.

Former Gov. Jon Corzine had blocked the hunt in 2006.

Fish and Game Division Assistant Director Larry Herrighty said all seven council members voted in favor of the hunt that would begin in December. It still needs approval from acting Environmental Protection Commissioner Bob Martin.

"I intend to scrutinize this proposed policy to make sure it provides the best possible solutions to the considerable challenge of managing this valued wildlife resource in the nation's most densely populated state," Martin said in a statement.

Already, the vote has wildlife advocates criticizing the council's decision.

"Today's action by the Fish and Game Council is a step backward for bear management in New Jersey," Sierra Club Director Jeff Tittel said.

The group believes garbage is at the root of problems with nuisance bears.

In a statement, the Sierra Club offered alternatives, including protecting bear habitats, hiring bear conservation officers, and using non-lethal conflict

resolution — such as educating humans on how to avoid attracting bears.

Herrighty said the new policy will also include non-lethal methods of controlling the state's bear populations. The proposed policy mentions creating unpleasant environments for bears for bears who enter residential areas by making noise. Herrighty dismissed the assertion by wildlife advocacy groups that those methods alone could do the trick.

The council's policy will continue to allow farmers who hold special permits to kill black bears that destroy crops and threaten livestock.

Department of Fish and Wildlife accounts show complaints of attacks on livestock increased from 13 in 2006 to 57 in 2009. Complaints from crop farmers have also seen a sharp increase, from nine in 2006 to 29 in 2009.

Bear numbers saw a 62 percent rise in Sussex and Passaic counties between 2002 and 2007.

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Researchers at East Stroudsburg University estimated the New Jersey black bear population was 3,438 in 2009.

In 2007, the state Department of Environmental Protection implemented sweeps of counties with the most black bear complaints, issuing warnings or fines to people suspected of feeding bears, which officials believe explained the rise in complaints.

The state Supreme Court, just a year earlier, ruled against three hunting groups that wanted to overturn a decision by former DEP commissioner Lisa Jackson to cancel a scheduled hunt. The decision came shortly after Gov. Corzine cast doubts on the efficacy of bear hunts in controlling population.

Calls to Gov. Chris Christie's office for comment were not immediately returned Tuesday.

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