

## Hearing held on 1st NJ black bear hunt in 5 years

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TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — Supporters and opponents of what would be the state's first approved bear hunt in five years weighed in Tuesday on rules that would authorize a fall hunting season.

The Environmental Protection Department and the Fish and Game Council heard from several groups, including The Humane Society, the New Jersey State Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs and other nature conservation groups during its black bear management policy hearing Tuesday night.

Groups in support called anti-hunters too emotional and impractical. Some in the groups against the plan called the hunters supporting it extreme and bloodthirsty.

"As an outdoorsman, I'm always thrilled to see a bear in my backyard, but it's not fun to see a bear on my deck," said August Gudmundson, who supports the hunt.

Julie Divine, a northern New Jersey resident, said she had more reason to fear humans than bears during a hunt season.

"I was so afraid of gunshots, the ricochet gunshots from the bear hunting," said a choked-up Divine, who began driving her children to school when the last state-sanctioned hunting season opened in 2004.

Sportsmen groups, appearing to outnumber those against hunting bears, said science-based research supported hunting to reduce risky human-bear interactions, which wildlife officials say are on the rise.

Acting Environmental Commissioner Bob Martin in March approved a plan that includes a hunt, saying research shows the black bear population is growing. Martin also says the number of serious bear incidents, including attacks on domestic and farm animals, is on the rise.

Ed Markowski, former president of the New Jersey State Federation of Sportsmen's Clubs, mentioned

the non-lethal methods that hunt opponents say are underutilized.

"Take away the bird feeders, the backyard grills, and put lids on the trash cans and you still have done nothing to control the bears that continue to breed," he said.

Researchers at East Stroudsburg University estimated the New Jersey black bear population was 3,438 last year. Bear numbers saw a 62 percent rise in the state's bear country, Sussex and Passaic counties specifically, between 2002 and 2007.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife accounts show complaints of attacks on livestock and ravaging of crop farms have increased threefold and fourfold since 2006.

Markowski said at least 75,000 hunters spread out around the state were deer hunters and that some would be interested in hunting bears. In years past, he said, the department limited the number of permits issued to bear hunters. Of the available permits, slightly more than half were issued, he said.

The Bear Education and Resource Group, which is opposed to all hunts, is suing the Fish and Game Council. The group alleges the council violated the Open Public Meeting Act, which requires the council to allow members of the public to attend its meetings.

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Len Wolgast, chairman of the council's game committee, said all the council's regular meetings are open but subcommittee meetings, including those of the game committee, don't have to be.

At least two groups — one opposed and one in support of the hunt — provided bus service to residents from around the state who wanted to speak during the public comment portion of the hearing.

Following the hearing, the Fish and Game Council is expected to consider the comments and submit a final plan for the commissioner's approval.

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