



Contact: Samantha Bruegger, Executive Director
(970) 531-6720, sbruegger@wawildlifefirst.org
Claire Loeb Davis, Board President
(206) 601-8476, claire@animalearthlaw.com

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Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission Votes to Permanently Eliminate Recreational Spring Bear Hunting

Olympia, WA—Washington Wildlife First applauds the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission’s landmark decision today to establish a state policy eliminating recreational spring bear hunting. After a lengthy workshop devoted to the discussion of spring bear hunting, the Commission voted 5-4 to approve a policy stating the Commission does not approve “recreational hunting of black bears in the spring.”

“We thank the Commissioners for their courage, dedication to scientific integrity and ethical wildlife management, and commitment to representing the values of the people of Washington,” says Samantha Bruegger, executive director of Washington Wildlife First. “After a lengthy and often painful process, the Commission has finally made it clear that Washington will no longer have a recreational spring bear hunt.”

Commission Chair Barbara Baker and Commissioners Tim Ragen, Lorna Smith, John Lehmkuhl, and Melanie Rowland supported the new policy, while Vice-Chair Molly Linville and Commissioners Kim Thorburn, Jim Anderson, and Don McIsaac opposed.

Supporters of the new policy focused on the importance of being faithful to the Commission’s statutory mandate, looking carefully at the science and data, and restoring the public’s trust in the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. Chair Baker emphasized that the Commission’s failure to definitively decide the spring bear issue has eroded its credibility and contributed to the false impression that there is a “culture war.” She emphasized that when the spring bear hunt began nearly 50 years ago, it was a carefully controlled hunt for clearly delineated management reasons, but it morphed into a recreational hunt without the Commission ever approving that change.

“As Commissioner Baker called out during today’s debate, the Commission continued to approve spring bear hunting long after the Department could show any management need, until the public pointed this out two years ago,” Bruegger says. “When the Department was challenged, it could not provide the science or data that supported any management need for the hunt, and it was finally forced to admit that this was only a recreational hunt. But it has long been clear that the Washington public is overwhelmingly opposed to recreational spring bear hunting.”

Spring bear hunting is legal in only eight other states, and surveys have long shown that it is deeply unpopular with the Washington public. [A recent poll commissioned by Washington Wildlife First](#) confirmed that 80% of Washington voters oppose spring bear hunting, which targets black bears when they are emerging from hibernation, and often leads to the orphaning of nursing cubs. The

survey also showed that 69% of Washington voters in hunting households oppose spring bear hunting.

Commissioners Thorburn and McIsaac insisted that the hunt should continue despite this overwhelming opposition, for the benefit of the few hundred Washingtonians who participate in it each year. Department Director Kelly Susewind, [who has vowed](#) that he would bring back the controversial trophy hunt, echoed those demands, insisting it was not enough for hunters to only be able to kill bears during the fall season that runs from August to November.

“Spring hunting is very different... I can tell you from personal experience, my first game animal was a spring bear 51 years ago, that it is a very different experience,” Susewind said. “Don’t say my opportunity [to kill bears] in the fall replaces my opportunity in the spring. It does not.Don’t tell me that it is the same thing, and that if I kill a bear in the fall it is the same as if I kill a bear in the spring. It’s just not.”

Bruegger said that the personal hunting preferences of the agency director should not control Washington’s wildlife policy.

“Washington’s wildlife policy should reflect the values and ethics of all the people of the state, not just the fewer than 3% who hunt, the even smaller percentage that hunts bears, or the few hundred that hunt bears in the spring,” she said. “I am a hunter, but I do not believe that my recreational interests entitle me to dictate how Washington manages its wildlife, and neither should the preferences of the Department director.”

Today’s vote marks the end of the Commission’s lengthy discussion of this subject, which began more than two years ago after citizens first raised serious concerns about the lack of scientific justification for the hunt. Late last year, a short-staffed Commission voted 4-4 not to approve the Department management’s request for a spring 2022 bear hunt. Since that time, that decision has been criticized by bear hunters from around the country, who have proclaimed that the vote was the first step in a broad conspiracy to eliminate all hunting in Washington.

“We applaud the Commissioners for standing by their convictions under intense pressure, brutal criticism, and sometimes even threats of violence,” said Claire Loeb Davis, president of Washington Wildlife First.

“Most Washingtonians support the continuation of legal, regulated hunting—as does Washington Wildlife First and every single member of the Commission. But that does not mean hunting without limits, and we join the vast majority of the Washington public in believing that it is wrong to kill bears in the spring just for ‘recreation,’ at a time when bears are just emerging from hibernation, many are near starvation, and bear cubs are still nursing,” Davis said.

“It is absurd to say that today’s vote is the first step toward eliminating hunting in Washington, but we do hope that the Commission’s steadfast stand on the spring bear issue will be remembered as the end to the Commission rubber stamp, and as one of the first steps in successfully demanding more transparency, accountability, and honesty from Department management.”