

We at Montana Sportsmen Alliance (MSA), would like to take a moment and offer comments on the FWP Commission's proposal to lengthen the spring black bear season to June 15th across the state. We find this proposal to be totally uncalled for, unnecessary, and unethical.

This proposal follows in the wake of allowing the use of hounds 2 years ago, something which hadn't been legal in Montana for 100 years. A review of the harvest data for R-1 here in NW Montana from 2007-2022, where an average of 38% of all bear harvest occurred in this state, indicates that a record harvest occurred in 2022 of 749 black bears in R-1 alone. This is in spite of the fact that the hunting of black bears with hounds in R-1 is currently not allowed, but there is a push by houndsmen to change that. Tack on to that a wounding loss rate of 10-15% and the resultant mortality is clearly unsustainable. The further lengthening of the spring season will only make things worse.

Black bear harvest rates are often determined by berry availability. Here in NW Montana, huckleberries are their primary source of food. During poor berry years, black bears are more stressed and are more likely to visit low elevation areas in search of other berries such as serviceberries and Douglas Hawthorne, which then makes them more vulnerable to hunters and other sources of mortality. Couple that with a significantly reduced birth rate during poor berry years and the population is definitely on a downward trend.

What is the impetus for this proposal? How many bears do we have to kill to satisfy houndsmen and outfitters? Black bears in Montana have a very low reproductive rate and don't produce young until the age of 5 or 6. Also, by lengthening the season, the proportion of bears harvested with rubbed hides will increase significantly, making them worthless as a trophy. Conflicts with hounds chasing grizzlies and the separation of females with young will only increase.

Wildlife belongs to all the citizens of Montana, whether they hunt or not. The public enjoys seeing black bears when they are enjoying the outdoors and it is a big part of why they like to live in this state. To treat black bears with a total lack of ethics and respect affects the image of all hunters, something we do not need. Please, do not go forward with this proposal.

MSA Leadership Group:

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