

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2003 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 629 (Delegate Frush, *et al.*)
Environmental Matters

Natural Resources - Black Bear Hunt - Moratorium

This bill prohibits the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) from establishing an open season to hunt black bears and from reducing the black bear population in any area of the State until July 1, 2009. Until then, DNR may kill a black bear only in defense of a person, a person's property, or domestic animals on a person's property and only after exhausting all nonlethal methods. Beginning July 1, 2008, DNR must survey the black bear population and report its findings to the Governor and specified committees of the General Assembly by December 1, 2008.

The bill takes effect July 1, 2003.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: State finances would not be affected; DNR regulations currently prohibit hunting black bears. DNR could conduct the survey with existing resources.

Local Effect: The bill would not directly affect local operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: Because black bears are classified as forest game animals in Maryland, DNR has the authority to establish an open season to hunt them. Under current regulations, however, hunting black bears is prohibited. DNR has the authority to reduce wildlife populations, if after an investigation, it is determined that the wildlife is seriously injurious to agricultural or other interests.

Background: The State's population of black bears, which now nears 400, has more than doubled since 1995. A ban on hunting black bears has been in effect since 1953. Also adding to the population's steady increase is the absence of natural predators and improved habitats. As the population has grown, so has the number of sightings and complaints. In 1996, the first year that DNR tracked these numbers, there were 196 complaints and sightings. In 2000, there were 617. In Garrett County, DNR reports that bear sightings are no longer reported because bears are known to inhabit all parts of the county, and sightings are considered commonplace. Almost 15% of the complaints cite actual damage to crops or property; however, this is a conservative estimate because damage often goes unreported. Residents of western Maryland report that bears often come into their yards and approach their homes and occasionally have entered, or attempted to enter, their homes.

DNR has responded to these complaints by providing technical assistance and educational materials to landowners and electric fencing to beekeepers. Since 1996, the sale of black bear conservation stamps has generated funds to compensate farmers and other landowners who report damage to agricultural crops caused by black bears. In January 2002, the Secretary of Natural Resources convened the Black Bear Task Force. This group is charged with development of a new black bear management plan for Maryland; its report is expected in March 2003.

Legislation was introduced during the 2002 session to reestablish a black bear hunting season. As amended and passed in the House, the bill instituted a black bear management permit program that addressed the problem of nuisance bears. The bill failed in the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: None.

Cross File: None.

Information Source(s): Department of Natural Resources, Department of Legislative Services

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