

Testimony in **OPPOSITION** of LD 337,
"An Act To Start a Spring Bear Hunting Season"
Before the Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries & Wildlife
Presented by Jayne Winters, South China, ME

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Senator Dill, Representative Nadeau, distinguished members of the Fisheries & Wildlife Committee, my name is Jayne Winters. I have lived in Maine all my life, am a retired state employee with 30+ years of service, and currently reside in South China. I am submitting comments in **OPPOSITION of LD 337**, "An Act To Start a Spring Bear Hunting Season" which simply states, "The commissioner shall establish a spring bear hunting season."

Although not a hunter or trapper, I understand the need to manage wildlife populations at healthy levels to avoid disease, starvation, vehicular injury and/or death and negative environmental impact. I recognize and appreciate the years of monitoring studies undertaken to help determine just what those "healthy levels" are. I realize our black bear numbers are outpacing what is deemed sustainable and that the potential problem(s) need to be addressed. But this bill is a blank slate – it offers no information, guidelines or boundaries regarding a spring hunt.

What kind of spring hunting season are you talking about? Trapping? Hounding? Baiting? Rifles, handguns, shotguns, muzzle loaders? Bow & arrow or crossbow? Or a combination of all of the above?

What will its duration be? What will the bag limit be? Will an added season increase the two per year take or just provide extra opportunity with the same limit?

Will a spring hunt be restricted to males or include females, who in all probability will have young cubs or yearlings with her? According to IF&W, 90% of cubs are born in January, meaning they would be 3-4mos old and just leaving the den when a spring hunt would begin. If the hunt is limited to gender, are hunters going to be astute enough to determine which bears are male vs. female? Researchers have difficulty determining sex, even at short distances. Wildlife managers state there's no way to prevent the killing of nursing females during a spring hunt, intentionally or not. Females forage for food at distances from their cubs and typically do not bring cubs to bait sites. If pursued by hounds, a female will leave her cubs hidden or in a tree to distract the dogs. Will there be any consequence to shooting a sow? Leaving orphaned cubs to die of starvation, predation or exposure doesn't seem a viable solution to me. Are the cubs just a sad end-result or are they "fair game" too?

In addition to the above questions, my initial thought about this bill was why would we want to hunt bear when they're just coming out of hibernation? Won't they be thin and in poor physical condition after months of primarily living off their fat reserves? Not understanding what the attraction would be, I looked on-line and found that only eight US states allow spring bear hunts: Alaska, Washington, Wyoming, Montana, Oregon, Idaho, Utah & Arizona. And yes, bears can lose up to 30% of their body weight during hibernation. I was also surprised to learn that Maine already has a limited spring bear hunt, albeit on tribal lands, but an option available if someone is gung-ho to do it.

Despite fall bears being larger and often having better coats (no spring rub patches), most hunters prefer the spring season because no other big game seasons are open. Hunters report somewhat higher success rates as 1) bears are feeding to make up for the winter fast; 2) shorter nights mean they move in the daylight more; and 3) the likelihood of shooting big males greatly increases during breeding season when they are bold and more active, looking for females.

Last year, the general bear hunting season in Maine ran from August 27 to November 24. These three months included baiting, trapping, and hounding (as the only state in the nation to allow ALL three of these methods, I'm curious as to why we can't better "manage" the population), as well as firearms. As of 2011, the bag limit was increased to two bears annually. Considering bears typically den up from December – April, adding a spring season would pretty much reduce their time to live without the threat of a hunt to only a couple summer months. Is this really necessary? What's next? Year around?

Maine used to have a spring hunt, but the legislature ended it in the 1980s. Rather than return to a spring season, maybe we should be looking at WHY the bear population is increasing. One, the number of hunters continues to decline. Two, no predators other than humans. Three, supplemental feeding with bait piles. A 2015 report by the University of Southern Maine concluded that "using bait increases the black bear population to very high levels..." IF&W's website notes, "Nutrition plays a major role in determining the number of cubs produced and cub survival." Craig McLaughlin, Maine's former lead bear biologist, stated, "There is little evidence that bear populations are regulated by internal factors, such as behavior. It is more likely that they are limited by their food supply, which may control age of sexual maturity, proportion of adult females that reproduce and survival." A 2017 Wisconsin study revealed that, "Female black bears that eat bait have been known to experience increased fertility."

It seems contrary to feed bears if we want to reduce their numbers. We're only contributing to the increasing bear population, not "managing" it. Instead of extending the hunting season, why not try stopping supplemental feeding and let the bears return to a reproductive and survival cycle based on natural food availability?

A spring hunt would likely help achieve the objective of removing more bears, but it undoubtedly would significantly impact the fall hunt, which supports an industry of guides, outfitters, lodges and other service providers in more remote areas of the state. Were an additional spring bear hunt implemented, fall success rates will surely decline, along with the associated incomes. In the past, the Maine Professional Guides Association (MPGA) opposed a spring bear hunt out of concern that it would change the business climate for guides. If you don't want to acknowledge the legitimate questions and concerns that I expressed at the beginning of my testimony, perhaps the economic ramifications of what could occur with a spring hunt will give you pause. Pause to, I hope, vote OUGHT NOT TO PASS on LD 337.

Thank you for your consideration.

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