



New approach to bear problem: BEAR League eyes backcountry feeding mission

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This summer's drought-like conditions have been bad news for bears.

The lack of moisture has led to a shortage of natural food, forcing the animals into civilization to find food, often ending with bears shot by alarmed residents or law enforcement, or struck by vehicles.

The BEAR League aims to do something about it, devising a plan to draw bears back into the wilderness.

Pending permission from the California Department of Fish and Game, the BEAR League would use food to lure bears farther and farther into the backcountry -- and away from developed areas.

"We are going to do backcountry food drops, putting natural food back into the backcountry," said Ann Bryant, executive director of the BEAR League, a group that promotes peaceful coexistence between bears and humans. "We have hundreds and hundreds of pounds of food we plan to put in several locations that won't bring the bears near neighborhoods."

The League would initially place food a short distance from neighborhoods, and then take the food farther into the woods, first by truck, and eventually by dropping it from aircraft.

Bryant said similar programs have been successful in other states including Alaska and Montana. In addition to getting the bears away from urban areas -- and the trouble they've been encountering -- the program would also provide better nutrition and improve the bears' health, she said.

Jason Holley, wildlife biologist for the California Department of Fish and Game, agreed that less food is driving bears to wander farther -- sometimes into populated areas.

"I think this year it is one of the main causes, but there is the constant numbers issue of more bears and more people," Holley said.

But Holley said the department's general policy would oppose feeding the bears.

"It's an unnatural situation that forces bears to congregate; who knows what long-term problems that could create?" Holley said. "If the smell of people is on the food, they could be more likely to associate people with food in the future, and they could become more susceptible to hunters."

He said no real solution may exist, asking instead that residents maintain vigilance.

"It's just a bad situation, but people should keep doing the usual things, like proper food and garbage

storage, securing their homes, having pets with you, and dog alarms work well," Holley said.

While waiting for permission, the BEAR League is looking for donations of either natural foods or money to purchase food, she said.

"The bears are so hungry they are coming into people's homes, so we hope to get permission to do this -- if not just for the bears, for homeowners too," Bryant said.

For more information on the BEAR League go to www.savebears.org, or call (530) 525-7297.

-- Tribune City Editor Elaine Goodman contributed to this story.