

## Fact Checker: Hunt won't keep bears away from humans

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### The claim

A bear hunt is needed in Nevada to decrease human-bear conflicts.

### The background

The current Nevada black bear population is estimated at 250 to 300. This compares to 25,000 in California.

There has never been a statewide sanctioned bear hunt in Nevada.

Nevada's bear population has remained stable for many years, but where the bears live has shifted more toward areas where wildlife and urban areas meet, due in part to a 1992 drought when bears were forced to look in new places for food and liked our easy pickings. That's according to a Nevada Department of Wildlife report.

The Nevada Wildlife Commission has proposed and initially approved a bear hunt. The plan will be discussed again at a Reno meeting Dec. 3-4 to determine regulation details.

When asked the reason for the hunt proposal, commission head Scott Raine of Eureka said, "It's all about the human conflict."

Ann Bryant of the BEAR League in the Tahoe area said, "We have hunting in California, and it doesn't help at all with bear-human contact. ... I think that hunting drives the bears from the back wilderness into the neighborhood areas. If I was a bear, I'd run into town and hide under someone's deck where I'd be safe. Remember, part of the proposal is to allow bears to be chased by dogs."

The Nevada Department of Wildlife did not propose the hunt but is charged with providing biological data on such things. Does it think a hunt would decrease human-bear conflicts?

The question was addressed in a 2005 report written by the state's top bear expert, wildlife biologist Carl Lackey:

"With the urban-interface bears, whether death comes anthropomorphically (by humans) or not, does not seem to matter. Within days or weeks another bear, usually a large, adult male will appear and occupy the same neighborhood. A legal harvest season would then not seem to be a solution to the nuisance bear problem."

Raine admitted there likely won't be much difference in bear-human conflicts because the hunt is expected to allow only a limited number of kills.

But he said if you walk out your door and run into a 400-pound bear, it's scary.

"One guy was telling me a bear was trying to go upstairs where his wife and daughter were," Raine said. "We'll be responsible when a bear kills the first person if we don't do anything."

Based on injuries and death tolls, bears should also be fearful of encounters. So far this year, the wildlife department reports humans have killed 29 bears in Nevada, either intentionally or accidentally in vehicle accidents.

Lackey in his Nevada black bear report wrote, "There has never been a case where a bear acted aggressively toward a person."

Raine said that property damage is also a concern.

"The number of e-mails I get, it's all the time saying, 'My garage was broken into, my door was torn down, they killed my horse, they broke into my yard, they tore down my fence,'" he said. "They're everyday occurrences, it seems."

The Nevada Department of Wildlife's "2009-2010 Big Game Status" report says that 65 percent of all problem-bear calls happened in Washoe County that fiscal year, with most in Incline Village.

"Property damage for the year was estimated at between \$40,000 and \$60,000. This figure was significantly higher than in past years and can be attributed to 2 or 3 individual bears in the Incline Village area. These bears were typically entering garages and homes by ripping holes in the garage doors or pushing in and collapsing front or back doors to the houses. Actual damage was likely much higher given that many people do not report these incidences."

The two troublemaker bears were "removed," NDOW reports.

Bryant's BEAR League has 200 trained volunteers around the Tahoe basin to help with human-bear conflicts as part of the group's efforts to improve human-bear relations.

She said, "Bears are lured by food. If food is locked up and made inaccessible -- bird seed, dog food, garbage -- they stop coming because they only come to score an easy meal. In neighborhoods with mandatory (bear-proof) trash containers, they don't ever have bears. That would help a million times more than hunting."

Raine said his group doesn't have the power to mandate bear-proof trash containers, but it does have the power to create a hunt.

In response this week to the question of whether a bear hunt would decrease conflicts, NDOW officials responded: "The bear hunt is not a permanent solution. Only strict ordinances on trash storage will do that."

They added that hunters could kill nuisance bears currently being killed by NDOW staff in some urban-interface areas if an archery-only summer hunting season were approved, but the commission rejected that proposal.

## The verdict

The stated reason for the first statewide bear hunt in Nevada is it's needed to reduce human-bear conflicts.

Even if bears are a danger (although there's no record of them ever threatening anyone in Nevada) and even if property damage is common (although the number of reports seems exaggerated because different tellers are repeating the same incidents), it's doubtful a hunt would decrease these problems, based on the experiences of those charged with public safety and studying bears.

Truth Meter: 3.

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