



Public Hearing – March 6, 2017
Environment Committee

Testimony Submitted by Commissioner Robert J. Klee

Senate Bill No. 522 – AN ACT AUTHORIZING BEAR HUNTING IN CONNECTICUT

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony regarding SB 522. The Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) offers the following testimony.

It is the opinion of our wildlife biologists that bear hunting — with prudent limitations — is consistent with best practices for wildlife management for Connecticut.

Historically, deforestation (the conversion of forest land to agricultural uses) caused bear populations to shift out of the state. As recently as the 1980s, bear were absent from the state. As Connecticut’s landscape returned to forests suitable for black bears, the conditions were set for a return of the population. Today, we estimate that at least 700 individual bears populate the state, with greatest concentration in the northwestern region from Barkhamsted to Oxford. The University of Connecticut studied the bear population in that area of the state, and estimated there were between 397 and 457 black bear in northwestern Connecticut as of 2015.

Based on the tagging and tracking data gathered by the Department, we estimate that Connecticut’s black bear population is increasing at a rate of 10 percent per year. In the absence of natural predators and with easy access to food sources associated with the presence of humans, it is reasonable to project that the population will continue to increase, with the overall population reaching 3,000 or higher (based upon observed density in similar habitats).

With the growing bear population, reports of nuisance bears and bold and aggressive bear behavior are increasing. In addition to the approximately 6,700 bear public sightings reported in 2016, an approximately 50 percent increase over 2015, DEEP received 960 reports of property damage. Similarly, the 43 bears killed by vehicles in 2016 was among Connecticut’s highest annual totals.

Bear management presents a growing and increasingly costly challenge. Relocation of bears is not a viable solution because bears tend to return to their home ranges, and other states refuse to allow bears to be relocated within their borders. DEEP’s bear management involves public outreach and education, research and monitoring, and intervention practices. None of these has any effect on population growth or distribution.

If this bill becomes law, DEEP could proceed in crafting rules for a bear hunting program that would help manage the population and curb the escalating rates of bear-human interactions, while ensuring that bears have a place in our state’s ecosystem now and in the future.

If you should require any additional information, please contact Lee Sawyer, DEEP’s legislative liaison, at 860.424.3332 or lee.sawyer@ct.gov.