Public Hearing – March 24, 2025
Environment Committee

Testimony Submitted by Commissioner Katie S. Dykes

Senate Bill No. 1523 – An Act Concerning Bear Hunting

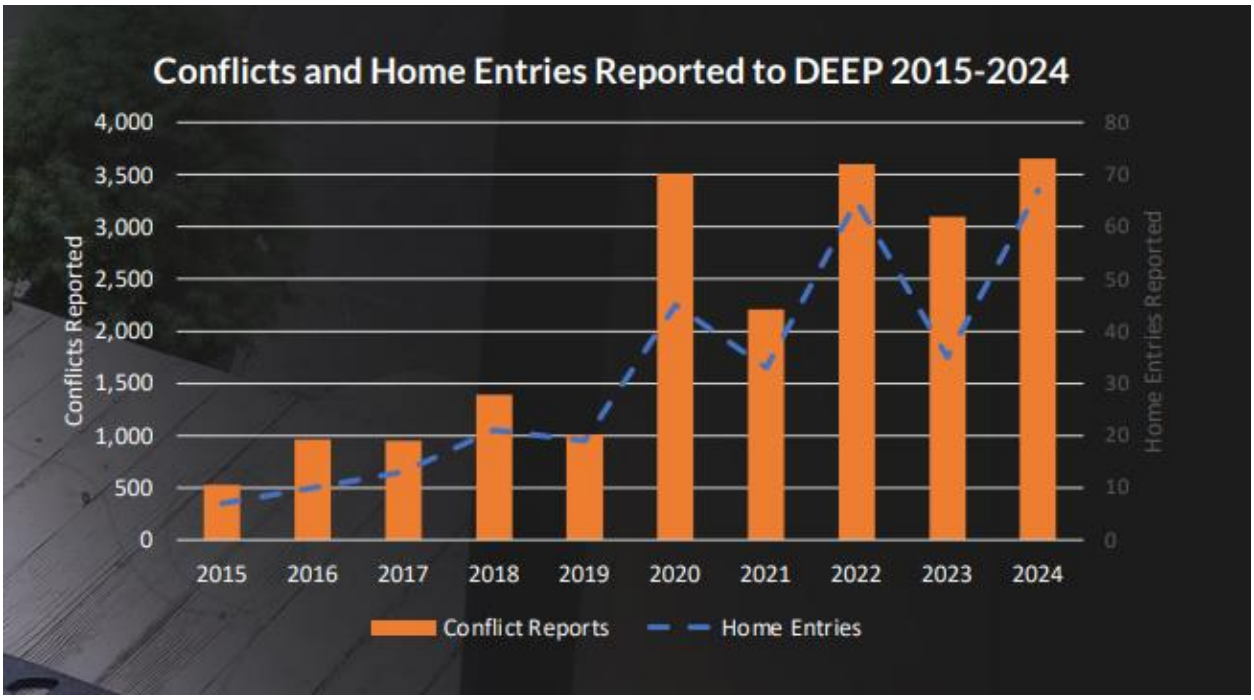
Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on Senate Bill No. 1523 – An Act Concerning Bear Hunting. The stated purpose of this bill is to authorize the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP) to establish a bear hunting season, and it would require DEEP to promulgate regulations doing so.

Because the frequency and severity of human-bear conflicts have increased significantly over the past decade, DEEP **supports** this legislation as we believe a regulated bear hunt is a critical and needed addition to the suite of black bear management tools we currently employ to protect the public, reduce human-bear conflicts, and support a healthy and sustainable black bear population. DEEP supports a regulated harvest for two primary reasons:

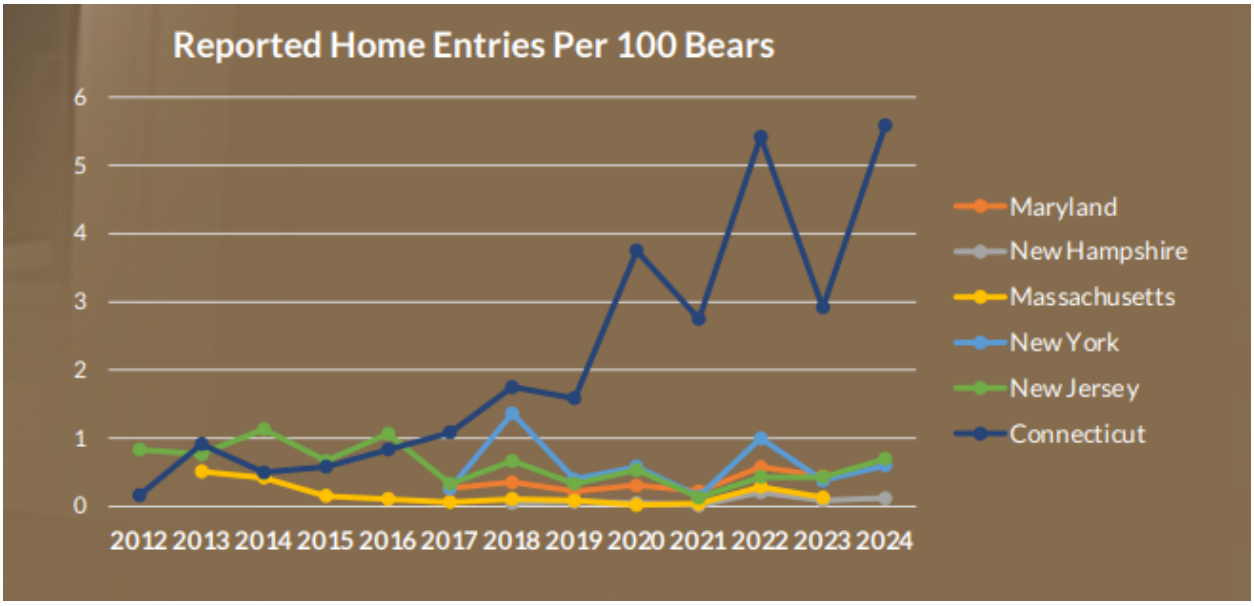
1. Human-bear conflicts have escalated in frequency and severity over the past decade resulting in elevated risk to the public, and this trend is likely to continue and to affect more Connecticut communities as bear populations increase and expand their range.
2. Non-lethal bear management strategies, such as DEEP's significant investments in public education and outreach, have failed to decrease human-bear conflicts.

1. Human-bear conflicts have escalated in frequency and severity over the past decade.

Many black bears in Connecticut have lost their natural fear of humans, becoming habituated and food conditioned, causing a public safety risk resulting from a drastic increase in human-bear conflicts. A decade ago, Connecticut reported approximately 500 human-bear conflicts which have now increased to over 3,500 human-bear conflicts annually as demonstrated in the graph below and our State of the Bears report.



A more concerning trend is the significant increase in reports of home entries by bears, something that occurred less than 10 times in 2015 but occurred a record 67 times in 2024. Connecticut home entry rates stand in stark contrast to neighboring states with larger bear populations that record far fewer home entries. For example, in 2024, Connecticut had five times more home entries per 100 bears than our neighboring states with bear populations, as shown in the chart below.



Finally, seven bear attacks on humans were recorded in Connecticut during the past five years. Thankfully, most resulting injuries were minor, but in 2022, a 10-year-old was severely injured.

In 2023, the legislature passed PA 23-77, which allowed bears to be killed in self-defense when a bear threatens a person or a pet or is in a house. In 2024, DEEP Environmental Conservation Police (EnCon) responded to three instances of bears killed under these circumstances. Incidents like this are inherently dangerous and often involve firearm use in high stress situations. DEEP would prefer to manage bears in a way that avoids the need to use firearms use in self-defense scenarios.

2. Non-lethal bear management strategies, such as DEEP's significant investments in public education and outreach, have failed to decrease human-bear conflicts.

DEEP has a robust public education campaign focused on preventing human-bear conflicts and has invested $100,000 in professional marketing to promote living safely with bears including paid social media advertising and billboards on major road leading into regions with high bear conflicts. We publish an annual State of the Bears report which makes this data transparent and available to the public. DEEP offers community education programs, educational videos, social media tips, and opportunities for on-site consultation with a biologist. We also have joined BearWise, which provides flyers, tips, and other bear safety messages in easily distributable formats. DEEP issues press releases in the spring and fall reminding residents how to live safely with bears and has provide bear safety advice through countless media inquiries. We are grateful to the numerous external partners who have helped amplify bear safety messages. DEEP wildlife biologist and EnCon officers have responded to many calls requesting help with nuisance bears, placing increased demands on DEEP Environmental Conservation Police, which spent 630 hours of staff time responding to 287 calls for service related to bears in 2024, versus an average of 211 annual calls for service in 2022-23.

Despite these efforts, human bear conflicts continue to increase. The data demonstrates a clear pattern of escalating risk to public safety that is not fully replicated in neighboring states that have bear hunts.

Clarifications related to DEEP's position on bear hunting:

DEEP does not support "trophy hunting." Should this legislation pass, DEEP will implement a closely regulated black bear harvest focused on ethical and sustainable use and respect for animals.

DEEP believes bear hunting can help reduce human-bears conflicts in both rural and suburban areas. Many of the home entries have occurred in towns with ample hunting opportunities. DEEP currently requires a 10-acre minimum and safety buffers that restrict firearms hunting in densely populated areas of the state. However, the home range of bears in developed areas is likely to also include rural areas where hunting could occur. Bears regularly travel many miles and have home ranges that can be quite large, often spanning multiple towns and a mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas. The 2025 State of the Bears report provides more information on bear home ranges.

Connecticut is the only northeastern state with a significant bear population that does not utilize a bear hunt. All our neighboring states with known breeding populations of bears have regulated bear hunts: Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont. The exception, Rhode Island, has very few bears, and the few bears observed there likely are dispersed from Connecticut and Massachusetts[1].

DEEP believes a regulated bear hunt can reduce human-bear conflicts while still allowing the overall bear population to grow sustainably. Should this legislation pass**,** DEEP would implement a regulated bear hunt with strict harvest limits in areas of the state where human-bear conflicts are most frequent and severe, allowing the overall statewide bear population to grow in a sustainable manner.

DEEP believes a regulated harvest will reduce conflicts. In 2024, Massachusetts, a state with one of the most conservatively regulated bear hunts in the country (less than five percent of their total bear population is harvested annually), had two home entries in stark contrast to Connecticut's 67 home entries in 2024. The major difference between the two states with respect to bear management is that Massachusetts has a hunt and Connecticut does not.

A peer-reviewed study examining the effects of implementing a bear harvest on rates of human-bear conflict in New Jersey, a state that has faced many similar challenges to Connecticut with respect to black bears, Raithel *et. al* 2017, found:

- A statistically significant decrease in conflicts when a bear harvest was implemented.
- A statistically significant increase in conflicts when the bear harvest was removed.
- Bears previously involved in conflicts were more likely to be harvested than bears that were not.

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony on this proposal. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Megan Andrews and Harrison Nantz at Megan.M.Andrews@ct.gov and Harrison.Nantz@ct.gov.

[1] https://dem.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur861/files/programs/bnatres/fishwild/pdf/blackbear.pdf