

Bear hunt put off, probably for years

State is told more time is needed to get information on Central Coast bears

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The state Department of Fish and Game has indefinitely shelved a proposal to establish a bear hunt in San Luis Obispo County.

Biologists this week told the Fish and Game Commission that they need more time to gather data on Central Coast bear populations.

"We do not plan to come back with additional hunt proposals in the Central Coast range in 2011," said Eric Loft, chief of the department's wildlife branch.

"Instead, over the next few years, we're going to plan to further assess that relatively new and growing population that's in the Central Coast."

Bear hunting is already allowed in Santa Barbara County. No proposal has been made to expand hunting to Monterey County.

Jeff Kuyper, executive director of **Los Padres Forest Watch**, an environmental group, said the department will likely need three to four years to gather the data necessary to justify a hunt in San Luis Obispo County.

"Having accurate bear population data is critical," he said. "Without it, the department has no scientific basis to determine if, and at what levels, hunting should occur."

Kuyper's group and others were critical of the environmental assessment the department did of the status of bears in the county, saying it overestimated the number of bears living in the region. The department's population estimate is 1,067 animals.

The proposal to expand the hunt to San Luis Obispo County for the first time sparked a controversy that resulted in more than 10,000 public comments in opposition. The department is required by law to respond to those comments before a new hunt can be proposed.

"Because of the comments that we received on our environmental document, we actually believe it would be fruitful for us to go back and gather some additional data on the bear population that's in the Central Coast," Loft said.

Black bears are not native to San Luis Obispo County, having been excluded from the area by the larger and more aggressive grizzly bear. Grizzlies were extirpated in the state a century ago, and black bears began moving into the Central Coast from the Sierra Nevada.