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Despite protests, bear hunt still set for Friday, Saturday

By the Associated Press

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SUFFOLK, Va. -- A black bear hunt in 21,000 acres of the Great Dismal Swamp will proceed as planned Friday and Saturday, despite opposition from animal rights groups, officials said.

In Defense of Animals and the Animal Welfare Institute have sought to cancel the hunt with a letter-writing drive and online petition.

The two groups sent a 14-page letter, along with the American Environment Foundation, on Tuesday to the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife. In it, they wrote that the U.S. Department of Fish and Wildlife "failed to comply with proper procedures and has ignored its duties under federal law to evaluate the environmental impacts of the hunt."

John Stasko, a refuge supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the department will review the letter but go forward with the hunt. He said the department followed federal law and has provided information to the groups regarding its environmental assessment studies.

Stasko also said the groups had an opportunity over the last three years to raise objections but launched a final-week attempt to stop the hunt.

Suzanne Baird, the manager for the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, has said the refuge worked with biologists and concluded that the hunt "won't be a significant impact to the population" of black bears.

One-hundred hunters were selected through a lottery for the right to kill 20 bears. The hunt does not extend to the North Carolina portion of the refuge.