

Judge OKs black bear hunt in Great Dismal Swamp

A federal jurist says the killing of 20 animals in the national wildlife refuge wouldn't cause "irreparable damage" to the population.

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A two-day black bear hunt will begin today at Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, despite animal welfare groups' last-minute attempt to block it.

The hunt has a cap that allows hunters to kill up to 20 of the estimated 275 to 350 black bears in the swamp. It will be the first sanctioned bear hunt at the refuge.

An emergency injunction filed in federal court in Norfolk on Thursday argued that the hunt should be called off. Lawyers argued a hunt would upset the stability of the refuge's bear population and that wildlife officials didn't follow proper procedures to authorize bear hunting at the refuge. Deer hunting is allowed there now.

But a judge ruled that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service did take the correct steps to hold the hunt and that the hunt wouldn't cause "irreparable damage" to the swamp's black bears. Two Virginia residents, Danielle Moore and Kristie Phelps, and three organizations - In Defense of Animals, American Environment Foundation and Animal Welfare Institute - filed the emergency injunction.

Refuge manager Suzanne Baird said Thursday night that the hunt would go on, beginning today, with no changes. While the cap is 20 bears, Baird said, the expectation is that only about half that would be killed. If 10 are killed today, however, refuge officials will evaluate whether to continue the hunt.

Baird also said Thursday's legal tussle didn't change plans for future hunts. "The intent is that this be an annual hunt," she said. She said that with all refuge hunting, there would be a review and evaluation of this year's hunt before any decision was made about 2007.

D.J. Schubert, a wildlife biologist with the Animal Welfare Institute, said the group was disappointed but would turn its efforts to making sure that there wouldn't be a second hunt at the refuge.

Much of the legal argument to stop the hunt centered on technical arguments about whether the Fish and Wildlife Service took the proper steps to open the refuge to bear hunting. But Schubert said he thought that the two studies done on the Dismal Swamp's bear population - the same two used to justify the hunt - revealed pressure on the bears.

Schubert said he was concerned that Dismal Swamp bears were on an "island" and faced increasing pressure from residential development in Suffolk and Chesapeake.

To the south, Albemarle Sound creates a natural barrier.

"This is a biologically reckless decision by the Fish and Wildlife Service," he said. There are plenty of opportunities for bear hunting throughout the state that wouldn't infringe on the refuge's population, he said.

In fact, the limit of 20 bears set for the Dismal Swamp hunt barely equals 1 percent of the state's

bear kill last year.

Hunters killed 1,440 bears in Virginia in 2005, including 17 in Suffolk, five in Chesapeake and one in Virginia Beach.

The vast majority of black bears killed in Virginia were shot in the mountainous counties of the Shenandoah Valley and central and southwest regions of the state.

After studying the idea for years, the Fish and Wildlife Service officials approved the swamp hunt in September. About 350 hunters applied for permits, and a lottery chose 100.

Hunters were allowed a day in the swamp in mid-November to scout the 21,000 acres chosen for the hunt.

The refuge covers about 111,000 acres. It stretches from Suffolk to Chesapeake to North Carolina, though all the hunting areas are in Virginia.