6/30/2005
Division of Wildlife

Roaring Fork Bear Study Aims to Provide Solutions to Human-Bear Conflicts

Federal and state researchers and wildlife managers team for comprehensive urban bear study.

This year, scientists from the United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), in collaboration with the Colorado Division of Wildlife (DOW) and Colorado State University (CSU), will begin the initial phases of a study to better understand how the movement, behavior and ecology of black bears in urban areas relate to the management of human-bear conflicts. The study will be conducted in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley and will include the cities of Glenwood Springs and Aspen.

"There has always been some level of conflict between bears and people in this area," said Pat Tucker, DOW Area Wildlife Manager in Glenwood Springs. "What we are seeing now, however, is an escalation of that conflict. This study will help us better understand how our management efforts are working and what we might change to achieve greater success."

During the first 12 months of the study, a total of 15 bears will be captured in the Roaring Fork Valley area and fitted with GPS (Global Positioning System) collars. The bears will be monitored 24 hours a day to gather information on their movements and ecology. Subsequent years will focus on how management activities influence bear movement, behavior and ecology. In particular, researchers plan to evaluate the effectiveness of public education programs for reducing human-bear conflicts.

"As more and more people live in areas that are home to bears, there will continue to be a strong need for management strategies that help humans and bears coexist," states Dr. Stewart Breck, Research Wildlife Biologist with the APHIS National Wildlife Research Center in Fort Collins, Colorado. "Our goal is to help DOW evaluate their current management efforts and identify those that are the most effective at both reducing conflicts and balancing the needs of humans and bears."

Management responses to the growing number of "nuisance" bears range from lethally removing the bears to hazing and relocating them. Lethally removing bears is often unpopular with the public, while hazing and relocating are expensive and time consuming. One of the more long-term and sustainable strategies for reducing human-bear conflicts in urban and suburban areas seems to be the elimination of human-related food sources, such as trash, birdfeeders, and pet food. The Roaring Fork bear study will provide managers with a better understanding of how bears have altered their ecology to take advantage of human food sources and how managers can most effectively invest their time and resources to reduce problems.

In 2004, 49 bears were killed in the Eagle and Roaring Fork Valleys. This accounts for bears killed by landowners, roadkills, electrocutions, and bears that were killed under the DOW's bear policy. Due partly to more favorable weather conditions, so far this year only seven bears have been killed in the same area.

###