

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Kenai National Wildlife Refuge
Temporary Closure to Sport Hunting of Brown Bears
Q&As

August 29, 2014

Why is a temporary closure necessary?

The temporary closure to sport hunting of brown bears is necessary as a resource protection measure to ensure consistency with Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) purposes. The Service believes that documented levels of human-caused mortality of brown bears in 2014, combined with those of recent years, are causing the Kenai brown bear population to decline. Allowing additional mortality through sport hunting on the Refuge would conflict with its statutory purposes to conserve all wildlife in their natural diversity and ensure continued opportunity for visitors to hunt, view and photograph wildlife.

When will the closure take effect?

The temporary closure will be effective from September 1, 2014 through May 31, 2015.

Won't this temporary closure conflict with current State regulations for hunting brown bears?

Regulations for State lands and Federal lands are occasionally different from each other due to the difference in management mandates for the two agencies. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the Alaska Department of Fish & Game (ADF&G) will continue to coordinate and develop a mutually acceptable brown bear harvest management strategy on the Kenai. Both agencies are focused on ensuring the long-term conservation of Kenai brown bears. Brown bears are a very valuable resource for multiple reasons and we agree with the State that maintaining a healthy population benefits all of us.

What legal authority do you have to do this?

The FWS is authorized to implement closures through provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) as well as the agency's own regulations.

Has anything like this ever been done before?

Yes. In late October last fall, the Service implemented a 30-day emergency closure of the brown bear sport hunt on the Refuge. The Service has also in the past implemented in-season closures of subsistence moose hunts on the Refuge.

How many brown bears are there on the Kenai Peninsula?

In 2010, Refuge and U.S. Forest Service biologists conducted a study which generated a Kenai Peninsula-wide population estimate of 582 bears. This revised estimate is slightly lower than a previously reported value of 624 brown bears. This change occurred because a recalculation of

- the available habitat within the sample frame increased from 9,500 km² to 10,200 km² which decreased the density estimate and, consequently, the extrapolated estimate of the peninsula-wide population.

How many brown bears have been killed?

To date in 2014, 54 brown bears have been reported to have been killed on the Kenai Peninsula. Of this total, 52 were taken by hunters this spring and 2 bears were killed in defense of life or property. This follows 2013, when 71 brown bear mortalities were documented. We expect that mortality levels in 2014 will again reach 70. The State of Alaska manages the harvest of brown bears under caps of 70 bears annually and no more than 17 adult females. Additionally, females with cubs cannot legally be harvested.

Why is the FWS concerned about the current level of mortality?

Because brown bears have relatively low reproductive potential, it is important that we manage the population cautiously, and consistent with Refuge purposes. The Service believes that levels of documented human-caused mortality of brown bears in 2014, combined with those of recent years, are causing the Kenai brown bear population to decline. Allowing additional mortality through sport hunting on the Refuge would conflict with its statutory purposes to conserve all wildlife in their natural diversity and ensure continued opportunity for visitors to hunt, view and photograph wildlife.

Is it true that the Service is taking this action because you do not support hunting?

The Service supports hunting when compatible with Refuge purposes and legal mandates, and provides these opportunities for many big and small game species and waterfowl on the Refuge.

Won't people be safer if the brown bear population is reduced?

Public safety will always be a priority for the FWS.

Living and recreating in bear country always poses some level of risk. Negative bear encounters in the back country can be minimized by taking proper precautions, and in urban environments by instituting good management practices such as eliminating attractants around homes and businesses, and providing deterrents such as electric fencing around livestock.

The Kenai Peninsula's human population is growing rapidly, and more and more people are living and recreating in and near brown bear habitat. Conservation of a healthy population of brown bears on the Kenai will increasingly challenge us with finding ways to successfully coexist with bears.

Why do you feel a more conservative approach to managing brown bears is warranted?

The temporary closure to sport hunting of brown bears is necessary as a resource protection measure to ensure consistency with Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) purposes. Because Kenai brown bears are an isolated population, have low reproductive potential and are difficult to monitor (counting bears accurately in forested regions like the Kenai is extremely difficult and very expensive, which limits how often we can do it), the brown bear management regime on the Refuge requires this approach.

- Brown bears are a very valuable resource for multiple reasons and maintaining a healthy population benefits all of us.

Why is the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge important for brown bears?

The Refuge is critically important for maintaining a healthy brown bear population because it protects some of the Kenai Peninsula's most important brown bear habitat. Many Kenai brown bears den on the Refuge, and its numerous anadromous streams are heavily used by bears when salmon are present.

