



WILDLIFE

Columbia Falls Considers Adopting Ordinance to Reduce Bear Conflicts

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks received 30 calls in 2022 concerning conflicts involving grizzly bears in city limits, prompting a temporary emergency ordinance last year

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MAY 16, 2023





A grizzly bear in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem seen on Sept. 12, 2021. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

After a marked increase in grizzly bear conflict incidents in Columbia Falls last year, city leaders are considering adopting an ordinance to try and reduce human run-ins with grizzlies and other bears.

In a vote Monday night, the Columbia Falls City Council directed City Manager Susan Nicosia to draft an ordinance regarding animal conflict prevention measures, and to also draft a resolution which would essentially be a statement from the city about its desire to reduce human conflicts with bears within city limits, as well as emphasizing the importance of outreach and education to further that goal. All members of the council voted in favor of having an ordinance drafted and also approved the resolution. Mayor Don Barnhart and Councilor Mike Shepherd were not present at the meeting. The draft ordinance and resolution will be on the council's June 5 meeting agenda.

In discussion about what that ordinance might look like, the council relied on a wide-ranging emergency ordinance passed last September as a starting point, with council members generally agreeing they did not want to see the full slate of those measures adopted into an ordinance. Most councilors said they supported the idea

of requiring more responsible handling of garbage by citizens. Some members balked at the idea of adopting other measures laid out in the emergency ordinance on a permanent basis, including stipulations about cleaning and properly storing barbecue grills and emptying bird feeders at night.

“I think I could support an ordinance, especially in the field of garbage. That’s a public health and safety thing,” Councilor John Piper said. “Reaching into people’s backyards with bird feeders and barbecues, I think that’s a tough sell. Most people would agree that garbage should be taken care of.”

On the topic of regulating something like an uncleaned grill in a backyard that appears to have attracted a bear, Columbia Falls Police Chief Clint Peters said he had concerns, not only with issues like burden of proof if someone were to be cited, but also with the kinds of interactions such a statute would foster between the police and residents.

“From a community policing side, do we really want to be citing somebody for having a barbecue in their backyard? Or if they had a dog that is an outside dog and they put food out and maybe that dog doesn’t eat that whole bowl and maybe that bowl is responsible for the bear being there?” Peters said. “So that’s my kind of trepidation. The garbage seems like a simple plan and it sounds like 50% of the problem.”

Based on a Monday night presentation to council by Justine Vallieres, a bear conflict management specialist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, handling garbage in a way aimed at reducing bear conflicts would likely help significantly as both the bear and human populations in the area continue to grow.

In 2020, FWP responded to 18 conflict calls in Columbia Falls involving grizzly bears. That number held steady in 2021, when another 18 conflicts were reported, and then nearly doubled in 2022, when Vallieres’ office received 30 conflict calls.

Of the 66 calls over that three-year span, Vallieres said 50% were due to garbage or pet food. Another 19% of conflict calls were due to livestock depredation. The remaining roughly 30% of conflict calls with grizzly bears in city limits were due to property damage (16%) fruit trees (10%) and livestock feed (4%).

“And those numbers do not account for outside of town, like going down (highway) 206,” Vallieres said. “It doesn’t account for that. It doesn’t account for all my black bear calls. It doesn’t account for my calls that are grizzly bear reports or sightings.”

Vallieres told the council Monday night that after the emergency ordinance went into place last year, she began receiving fewer calls about bear conflicts in Columbia Falls. She stopped short of proclaiming definitively that the ordinances were the reason for that drop-off, but she nevertheless thanked the council for taking action.

“It can be taken a couple different ways. I would like to think that the ordinance did its job and got people to secure attractants. There’s no way for me to truly gauge that,” Vallieres said. “Are people just not calling? Or did bears kind of quiet down? Did conflicts just decrease just because of the ordinance? I like to think that was the case. Either way, I know I got a lot of positive feedback and a lot of people applauding Columbia Falls for taking those measures, those steps to help decrease bear and human conflicts.”

The full slate of mitigation measures the city adopted last year came in the form of a 90-day emergency ordinance at a time when Vallieres said she was seeing her busiest year in five years in terms of bear conflicts, likely due to a variety of factors including weather and its impact on bear food sources like berries. That ordinance required all residents and business owners to abstain from feeding domestic animals outdoors unless food could be locked and secured overnight; to store all attractants including garbage and recycling indoors or in bear-resistant garbage cans; to remove ripe fruit from trees and areas around the trees and stop leaving fruit for bears and other animals; to remove or empty bird feeders at night and cease to leave food outdoors at night; to store coolers, grills, smokers and other items with food scent indoors; to secure domestic and commercial waste or store it indoors and cease to accumulate garbage and recycling in truck beds, yards or in vehicles; to store garbage indoors until the morning of scheduled pickup; and to secure chicken coops and add electric fencing if needed to deter bear activity.

Part of what makes Columbia Falls such a hotspot for grizzly bears is its location on the outskirts of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, which is one of six recovery ecosystems for grizzly bears. Northern portions of town can see higher bear activity, as does a corridor along the eastern edge of Columbia Falls that borders the Flathead River. Vallieres said the city is a natural wildlife and grizzly bear corridor, with geographic features creating a kind of bottleneck effect.

“We have bears coming off of Teakettle and the Apgar range and they come down and then they follow the river down,” she said. The Swan Crest and its terminus at Columbia Mountain also provides a natural travel corridor for bears feeding on serviceberries and chokecherries. “It’s just a heavily used area,” she said.

Also presenting before the council Monday night was Ryan Wilbur, a field project manager for People and Carnivores, a conservation group focused on protecting populations of large carnivores in the Northern Rockies. Wilbur said his organization is willing to work with the city and other public or private entities to provide funding or cost-sharing options to offset the costs of bear mitigation measures, and to help with education and outreach to reduce the potential for bear conflicts.

During council discussion, Councilor Paula Robinson threw her support behind increased efforts to educate people, including by educating kids in schools.

“I think one of the best ways to get parents to listen is education through the school of the younger kids. Because they take this stuff real serious and they’ll get on mom and dad,” Robinson said.

Councilor Darin Fisher said he liked the idea of public-private partnerships and emphasized how such partnerships might help ease the impact to a business that would be unfairly burdened by bear mitigation measures due to its location.

Vallieres said she could think of a few businesses along the city’s eastern corridor that have had repeated bear conflict issues and said she would like to see them get bear resistant containers. She noted the waste removal company Evergreen Disposal has bear-resistant dumpsters in stock right now, and indicated that partnering up with a group like People and Carnivores, could help offset costs.

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