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## Opinion: UM needs to be more Bear Aware

Vivien Felker / Montana Kaimin  
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With its unsecured food waste and bountiful fruit trees, the University of Montana is an Eden for hungry bears. UMPD has already sent out three Clery Act bear alerts a mere month into school, one of which was a sow and cubs that were roaming by the foot bridge last week.

As food-habituated black bears frequent campus more often and grizzly bears loom on the fringes of Missoula, the University needs to act swiftly to make campus bear-proof and educate its students on bear safety.

UM's east side of campus currently falls within the "bear buffer zone," or an area of high bear activity where trash must either be stored in bear-resistant containers or only out in the open after 5 a.m. on the day of pick up. As of last October, the zone was approved to expand into areas like Pattee Canyon, Big Flat and Upper Rattlesnake — but UM has been within the zone since it was originally enacted in 2010.



A black bear roams around Curry Health Center at 9:25 p.m. on Oct. 1.

Renna Al-Haj / Montana Kaimin

According to the ordinance, the University can be exempt from these restrictions if a waste management plan is drafted and approved by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. However, the University has yet to install bear-resistant trash cans and dumpsters or file an alternative waste management plan with FWP.

With the knowledge of this ordinance in mind, a group of students finalized a draft of a bear management plan in early 2023 as their Franke Global Leadership Initiative Capstone Project. Overseen by sustainability director Eva Rocke, this thorough proposal detailed an actionable plan and timeline for making campus bear-proof.

The plan recommended the purchase of 14 standalone bear-proof containers (trash cans) and 11 chain-link fences to be put up around the three-yard unenclosed dumpsters on campus, all of which would cost \$67,032.

The student group secured funding for two dumpsters from the Bozeman group People and Carnivores and two trash cans from the Kless Sustainability Fund. Rocke said that there are also cost-share programs available through FWP to help pay for the proposed infrastructure.

To deal with a lesser-known bear attractant, The UM student chapter of The Wildlife Society recently co-hosted an apple picking event with UM FLAT. Former Wildlife Society President Addie Wichman said although picking up fruit is a step forward, more traction is needed to encourage the University to be more proactive.

“We’re happy to clean up apples, but at the end of the day we’re student volunteers going up against a multi-million dollar business and trying to convince them why they should care about bears,” Wichman said.

To better support the individuals and groups trying to make these changes, the University could consider taking a percentage of all athletics ticket sales and putting it toward funding these projects. It would be a good image for the University to send some money toward protecting the omnivore whose likeness it claims as the “Montana Grizzlies.”

To further reduce conflicts with bears, the University should consider adding bear awareness training during first-year student orientation and creating a bear spray checkout program in which students can borrow cans of bear spray to take when they recreate.

“Every student on campus should have a can of bear spray,” said Jamie Jonkel, longtime FWP bear biologist and grizzly bear conflict specialist.

As grizzly bears establish themselves more within the Missoula Valley, they bring an added sense of urgency. It should not be overlooked by University decision-makers that a grizzly bear conflict on campus would be catastrophic.

A collared grizzly bear was on the back side of Mount Sentinel last year, according to Jonkel. Mount Sentinel and the Kim Williams trail are known corridors bears use to travel into town to feed on berries along the river.

When bears inevitably discover easily accessible trash on campus, they’ll likely become habituated to humans and their subsequent waste products. They then teach their young to behave the same way, as seen when a black bear sow and her cubs were sighted on campus earlier this week.

As bears get more food rewards, they develop a sense of entitlement and thus become bold in seeking out food sources, according to Jonkel.

The cost of not securing trash can also be deadly. Last year, a young black bear that was used to feeding on trash took the next leap and entered homes in search of food, which led to it being euthanized by FWP.

The University so often sells out-of-state students on the wildness of Montana, and it’s time for it to be held accountable for being negligent to the disservice it is doing to the bears. By not making it a top priority to mitigate human-bear conflict in an urban environment that was once, and still is, their home, the University clearly does not care enough.

## Vivien Felker