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Spring grizzly bear hunt significantly reduced for 2004

Department strengthens commitment to research

Edmonton... As part of Alberta's continued commitment to a conservative approach to grizzly bear management, this year's regulated spring grizzly bear hunt will be further reduced as follows:

- 73 licenses will be issued - a reduction of 44 per cent since 2002;
- the length of the season will be reduced by two weeks in all bear management areas (except the northernmost area) to reduce the impact on female bears; and
- the season will be closed in three bear management areas.

Adjustments to last year's spring harvest proved to have successful management results in targeted areas and were expanded where appropriate. In particular, shortening the season appears to have limited the impact on the female harvest.

In making the recommendation for the regulated 2004 harvest, department staff did a detailed review of last year's harvest and all bear mortalities in the province. In addition, the department considered information received from stakeholder groups, staff, the Grizzly Bear Recovery Team and the public as well as the previous recommendations of the Endangered Species Conservation Committee.

In light of the ongoing debate over bear population estimates for Alberta, the province has committed to conducting an inventory based on DNA census techniques in order to more accurately estimate populations. Alberta is one of the few jurisdictions that will be using actual census techniques to better estimate population numbers. Data collection will start as soon as possible this summer in two bear management areas.

This new management step builds on Alberta's comprehensive, proactive grizzly bear management program. For example, new legislation last fall established a maximum \$100,000 fine for poaching grizzly bears and introduced steps to improve public and bear safety through enforceable clean-up orders.

Attached Q and As.

For further information, contact:

Donna Babchishin

Communications
Alberta Sustainable Resource Development

Edmonton
(780) 427-8636

Dial 310-0000 for toll-free connection.

Grizzly Bear Hunt Questions and Answers

Q: Why reduce the length of the season?

This was a management step taken for the first time last year in three bear management areas and it has shown good results in keeping female mortalities low. Male bears tend to emerge from their dens earlier. Therefore, the season has been closed for the last two weeks during the time when females are more active. This is one of the steps in meeting the ongoing management objective to limit the female harvest to 35 per cent of the total hunt. Last year, there were 18 bears harvested legally, 4 of them were females (22 per cent).

While the harvest was shortened last year to deal with potential concerns in three specific areas, this management step is being expanded to all but one bear management area as a precautionary measure.

Q: What impact will the shortened season have on the hunting community?

Hunters will have to make some adjustments and will have to plan their activities within a narrower window of time. It could also reduce the hunter success rate. However, the hunting community has traditionally been supportive of adjustments to the hunt where there is evidence to support the changes and they have been strong advocates for a sustainable population.

Q: Why close bear management areas 4A, 6 and 7?

Following the review of last year's mortalities, it was found that these areas had higher mortalities (mostly non-hunter mortalities). The department therefore recommended a precautionary approach in these areas. Bear management area 4A was partially closed last year due to bear research occurring in the area.

Q: Why do we need more research into bear numbers when the government introduced a new model last year?

As part of a technical report released in 2003, Alberta published a revised population model. Wildlife biologists have identified some problems in applying the model, primarily the need for better input data. The key insights and observations of the technical report continue to inform Alberta's decision making.

The lack of good input information can greatly reduce the effectiveness of any model. Our objective is to gain information more directly, by going into the field to do a DNA-based census.

Q: What kind of additional indicators does the government have on the health and sustainability of bears?

Research and other information tells us that grizzly bears continue to have good overall health in Alberta. Grizzly bears in Alberta tend to have good reproductive success and they experience good summer weight gain overall. Grizzly bears are also found to continue to occupy the same landscapes and are even expanding those areas.

Alberta has always relied on a variety of information such as mortality data, existing research and field information. The province has received numerous reports of more frequent and widely dispersed grizzly bear sightings over the last few years - particularly from landowners, field staff, the hunter community, trappers, recreationalists and industry working in remote areas.

While there is no evidence of decline and there continues to be a high number of grizzly bear sightings and problem incidents (284 reports in 2003), Alberta is taking a precautionary approach with a limited, highly regulated and well-monitored spring harvest.

Q: Why choose bear management areas 3B and 4B to begin the new DNA work?

We intend to use the DNA technique in most bear management units. 3B and 4B are the core of the Foothills Model Forest study area where we have already done the required habitat mapping. We have a good information base in these areas and are ready to go for this summer.

For further information on current research activities and management actions, check the following website at <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/whatsnew/features/030812.html>.