

Consideration of a Wildlife Response Work Group

I'd like to propose to the Commission, that we consider forming a Commission designated work group to see if we can further expand efforts regarding how Oregon reacts to public/wildlife encounters. Let me give you four recent examples of what I'm talking about and propose an option for your consideration.

No. 1 As we know, there was a black bear yearling public encounter recently in Southern Oregon that resulted in the death of the bear. It garnered a lot of press and even a Legislative Hearing. I'm not going to comment on the background of the situation in southern Oregon as I don't have all the facts regarding the situation and these encounters can be quite contentious and resolutions are sometimes complicated to resolve at best. There was a request at the Legislative Public Hearing to form a Legislative Task Force. I don't believe that materialized though.

No. 2 Bear public encounters in the Cascades and Willamette Valley increased this last week. North Willamette Watershed District staff have received nuisance reports and multiple sightings of bears in Government Camp, Welches, and Wilsonville. In Welches, a yearling bear traveling with another yearling and adult sow were frequenting a large garbage pile on the back deck of a home with temporary residents. One resident proceeded to shoot and kill one of the yearlings. Oregon State Police (OSP) are investigating the event and staff have received numerous angry reports from community members about the shooting. Media requests regarding the event have been deferred to OSP Communications personnel.

No.3 Chintimini Wildlife Center in Corvallis has been keeping ODF&W staff updated on their capacity for wildlife intakes. They have seen an estimated 30-40% increase in calls this year, mostly from the Salem area. They have been attempting to triage which wildlife they will intake, partially based on geographic area. They foresee reaching capacity and increasingly having to turn people and animals away. Chintimini is currently the only rehabilitation facility that serves the Salem area.

4. Also this week wildlife District staff are responding to bear issues across East Region.

My request of the Commission is maybe we can do more to lead and facilitate the effort to help mitigate issues with public wildlife encounters throughout our state. In some cases, these conflicts result in dead animals, bad press, frustration and hard feelings among the public.

Background

As I understand, there are a network of about a dozen rehabilitation centers in Oregon that operate under ODF&W state and USF&W Service federal permits.

For example, the Portland Audubon rehabilitation facility takes in 3-5,00 injured and orphaned animals in any given year and responds to approx. 15,000 phone calls from folks regarding wildlife encounters.

Many people have no idea what to do when they encounter what they perceive is an orphaned fawn, a baby seal on the beach, a bird striking their window, a cougar on their trail walk, a coyote just ran off with their cat or a racoon that is constantly raiding their dog's food bowl or a bear in their garbage can.

They call the city, the county, an agency and that entity may not know or may not be able to respond on short notice as they are busy doing other tasks or they transfer the matter to another entity who gives them a different answer.

One question I ask is how do we engage the public in living with wildlife in their communities through more focused education. Investing more in urban wildlife education and in particular encounters between humans and wildlife needs greater attention. Some see urban wildlife as a nuisance and others see the encounter as a humane interaction and do the wrong thing in the name of humane treatment.

Recommendations I would suggest

- Appoint a work group to review the pros and cons of Oregon's existing wildlife response network including, the regulatory framework, responding efforts, funding, communication, non-lethal interactions and public engagement. Provide recommendations to the Commission/Department on how to address these issues by the late fall of 2021.
- Develop better communication systems between the response agencies and the general public. Simply put, who do you call?

- Expanded training for agencies who get calls regarding public/wildlife encounters. ODOT, State Parks, County Parks, Counties, City Police departments, Sheriffs, Vets, BLM, USFS, Park & Rec. Districts and the list goes on and on.
- Develop or expand a Living with Wildlife Outreach Program tailored to urban communities. How to prevent wildlife conflicts, urban wildlife stewardship and what to do when a problem happens.
- Consider using the OCRF as a potential funding source if additional funding is required to implement recommendations from the work group.

There are probably other ideas Commissioners and the Department might have and I may have gotten some of this all wrong but I believe we need to give some more attention to this issue for the good of the wildlife who face these encounters and to hopefully resolve this matter without having the Legislature pass a future Bill giving us similar direction.

I'm thinking of a small group that can meet in maybe two or three meetings late this summer and prepare recommendations for implementation before 2022. Representatives could include but not be limited to:

- Rep. from the Rehabilitation Centers
- Rep. from the Humane Society
- Rep. from OSP
- Rep. from ODF&W Public Affairs
- Rep. from ODF&W Wildlife division
- Rep. from the Commission
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