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Bear hunts planned to protect Douglas firs

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Black bears are nibbling Douglas fir trees to death on some timberlands, so hunters will get a chance to whittle down the bear population during special hunts this spring.

One of the hunts will happen in Capitol State Forest, where 50 hunters will go after bears in the Game Management Unit 663 part of the forest.

All told, hunters can apply for 295 permits to hunt black bears in five different parts of Western Washington.

"All the hunts in Western Washington are special black bear damage hunts," said Donny Martorello, carnivore, fur-bearer and special game section manager for the state Department of Fish and Wildlife. "The bears come out of hibernation in the spring — when food is kind of skimpy — and they've found that there is a sugar layer beneath the bark of 15- to 20-year-old Douglas fir trees."

The bears peel off the bark to get the sugar — and kill a lot of the valuable trees, Martorello said.

The hunts start April 15 and run through May 31 or June 15. Hunters must apply for a special permit to hunt the bears.

The state Department of Natural Resources — which manages Capitol State Forest — asked for the special hunt because bears are ravaging Douglas fir trees in parts of the forest, said spokeswoman Jane Chavey.

"There are a lot of 15-to-20-year-old trees, and the bears can get into sections and trash a lot of trees," Chavey said.

Capitol Forest is managed for timber production and recreation, and there are always sections of replanted trees reaching the age where they are a sugary treat for bears, Chavez said.

Other hunts are scheduled for game management units in Copalis, Kapsowsin, North Skagit and Monroe.

Bear hunters are not allowed to use tracking dogs during the hunts, Martorello said.

Most of the bear hunters do a lot of scouting and use maps that show areas where trees get a lot of damage, Martorello said.

"These are good hunters and they go the extra mile," Martorello said.

The state polled outdoors people to see whether they would prefer contract hunters take the bears — or create special spring hunting seasons so regular hunters could take a few animals.

Most people favored regular hunters, and the program appears to be a success, Martorello said.

"We're balancing timber needs with wildlife," Martorello said.

Not every hunter gets a bear, Chavey said.

Western Washington is prime black bear country, Martorello said.

"There is a hefty population of bears in the state, particularly in Western Washington," Martorello said. "The bear population is estimated at 25,000 animals."

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