

Louisiana Black Bear Recovery Action Plan



Louisiana black bear (*Ursus americanus luteolus*)

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region – Lafayette, Louisiana Ecological Services Field Office, August 14, 2009

Other FOs – Jackson, MS, Clear Lake, TX

NWRS – All in the LMV in LA and MS

▣ **Target:** Improve the Louisiana black bear's status to a point where it no longer requires ESA protection

Louisiana black bear:

Status: Threatened

Recovery Priority Number: 9 (moderate degree of threat/high recovery potential)

Recovery Plan: Louisiana Black Bear Recovery Plan, 1995

5-year Review: Initiated in August 2007; draft to be completed in December 2009

Other: Listed as threatened, January 7, 1992 (57 FR 588), Critical Habitat Designation, March 10, 2009 (74 FR 10349)

Threats:

The primary threats facing the Louisiana black bear are habitat reduction and fragmentation (resulting in demographic isolation of breeding populations) and human-induced mortality.

Habitat Loss and fragmentation: More than 80 percent of suitable Louisiana black bear habitat within its historic range had been lost by the time of listing (1992) primarily due to clearing land for agriculture; the remaining habitat quality has been reduced by fragmentation and human activities. Habitat loss and fragmentation limits the potential for the present Louisiana black bear subpopulations to expand their current breeding range, can restrict bear movements both within and between populations and can also result in increased mortality as bears are forced to forage on less protected sites, travel farther to forage, or cross barriers such as roads. Habitat fragmentation can also create barriers to immigration and emigration that can affect population demographics and genetic integrity. All known Louisiana black bear breeding subpopulations were believed to be demographically isolated at the time of listing. Bear populations in a relatively large habitat patch are not ensured of long-term survival without recolonization by bears from adjacent patches. The long term protection of habitat sufficient to support two or more viable subpopulations and the interconnecting habitat corridors supporting those populations are recovery

criteria for the Louisiana black bear. The majority of area lands within the Louisiana black bear's historic range are privately owned; therefore, Louisiana black bear habitat protection and restoration is highly dependent upon the voluntary protection and restoration of privately owned lands.

Other natural or human factors: Human related mortality of Louisiana black bears includes: accidents (e.g., vehicular collisions), poaching, and nuisance abatement activities (e.g., removal from the wild of bears posing a threat to human safety). All of these activities may be exacerbated by habitat fragmentation. Black bears are adaptable, and can thrive if afforded areas of retreat that ensure little chance of close contact or visual encounters with humans. However, as areas of suitable habitat decline and become increasingly fragmented, human/bear interactions increase. Bears can become attracted and accustomed to human food quite easily and once habituated, often learn to associate areas of higher human density (i.e., residential, commercial, and industrial areas) with a readily available food source. As a result, human-bear conflicts occur, and it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to deter nuisance behavior even through forced relocation of the offending animal. In such cases, the only alternatives are to place the animal in permanent captivity or destroy it. Additionally, as human-bear conflicts increase human tolerance of those situations decreases and can lead to illegal killing of bears. Opportunistic poaching of bears is also a threat.

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Current Status: Louisiana black bear breeding populations are predominantly restricted to three disjunct subpopulations located in the Tensas, the Upper, and the Lower Atchafalaya River Basins, in Louisiana. A fourth additional, newly forming, repatriation subpopulation occurs in east-central Louisiana, in the vicinity of the Red River and Three Rivers Wildlife Management Areas (WMA), and Lake Ophelia National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). The Tensas River sub-population is believed to be increasing. This is based on comparison of recent trapping data to past studies. This sub-population faces decreasing threats due to on-going focused habitat restoration/protection efforts. The Upper Atchafalaya sub-population is believed to be stable to increasing in terms of numbers and faces decreasing threats due to ongoing focused habitat restoration efforts. The Lower Atchafalaya sub-population status although unknown, is generally believed to be stable. Threats from nuisance behavior have been reduced but the threats to habitat for this sub-population remain unchanged. Black bear numbers appear to be increasing in adjacent Mississippi as well. As a result of recovery efforts (repatriation), an additional breeding sub-population exists in Louisiana (with one or two bears in adjacent Mississippi). A total of 48 females and 102 cubs have been relocated between 2001 and 2008. Natural reproduction by one relocated female was first documented in 2005. Since that time reproduction has been documented in several females each year. No reliable overall Louisiana black bear population estimate currently exists; however, estimates have been developed for specific geographic areas. Population estimates for Louisiana black bears at the time of listing (200 to 400 bears) appear to be lower than what recent research would indicate, and there is circumstantial evidence that the population is growing. We estimate the current population size to be 400 to 700 bears. Population studies and data collection for a population viability analysis (PVA) are underway.

Results of recent studies indicate that there has been a reversal in the pre-1980s trend of forest conversion to agricultural use in the Lower Mississippi River Alluvial Valley (LMAV). Available data indicates that, over the past three decades, forest restoration in the LMAV portions of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Arkansas has increased dramatically, and has led to a significant removal of land from agricultural production for the purpose of hardwood forest establishment. Most recent NRCS data indicate that between 1993 and 2008, over 180,000 ac

were restored to forestland via the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP), and over 200,000 ac via the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), within Louisiana black bear habitat priority areas in Louisiana and over 138,000 ac of WRP and 328,000 ac of CRP have been restored in Mississippi. Including existing forested lands that have been protected (e.g., NWRS, WMAs, etc.) over approximately 600,000 ac of land have been restored or protected in the bear's range in Louisiana alone since it was listed in January 1992.

Therefore, because habitat threats are decreasing and three of the four subpopulations are stable to increasing (with the fourth subpopulation status unknown); the overall species status is considered to be improving for this year.

Target: Improve the Louisiana black bear's status by implementing recovery actions to a point where it no longer requires ESA protection.

Measure: Assess population numbers and viability for two subpopulations, one each in the Tensas and Atchafalaya River Basins needed for recovery. Obtain information on other populations. Increase habitat restoration and protection to support all subpopulations and interchange between them. Educate the public and conduct conflict management to reduce human threats to and increase public support of a growing bear population. Improve recovery status from threatened to no longer requiring ESA protection.

Actions:

RA=Recovery Action; 1 st # = priority; 2 nd # = task no.	FY 09	FY 10	FY 11	FY12	FY 13	Totals Costs	Responsible Parties and Notes
Continue to work with existing conservation incentive programs to restore and protect key habitat areas in support of all subpopulations and movement corridors RA: 1.1-1.5	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$65,000	\$325,000	NRCS (WRP, CRP) FWS-ES(PFW)* FWS-NWR (PFW)* BBCC
Determine population viability of Upper Atchafalaya River and Tensas River Basin populations. Determine population goals; RA: 4.1-4.6 Note: Received FY2009 recovery initiative funding to support data analysis for this effort	\$251,000	\$244,000	\$204,000	\$204,000	\$78,000	\$ 981,000	LDWF* USGS* FWS-ES FWS-NWR* Note: total cost includes significant amounts of funding provided by LDWF via SWG, Sect 6, State and UT matching funds and NGOs

Determine subpopulation interchange and corridor needs and effectiveness to support interchange. R.A.: 4.2, 4.5, 4.6	\$40,000	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$15,000	\$100,000	LDWF* USGS* FWS-ES FWS-NWR* Note: total cost includes significant amounts of funding provided by LDWF via SWG and State matching funds
Reduce human bear conflicts through education and nuisance management RA: 2.1-2.4	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$25,000	\$125,000	WS* LDWF FWS BBCC* LE
Determine population viability of Lower Atchafalaya River Basin population. Determine population goals.	\$177,000	\$98,000	\$99,000	\$99,000	\$43,000	\$338,000	LDWF* USGS* FWS-ES FWS-NWR* Note: total cost includes funding provided by LDWF via SWG, Sect 6, and State matching funds
Provide current status information to the public, partners, etc on the status of LABB and the level of any remaining threats it faces. RA: 2.1	\$14,000	\$14,000	\$14,000	\$14,000	\$14,000	\$70,000	FWS* LDWF BBCC*
Ongoing Recovery Actions							

					\$45,000	\$45,000	FWS*
Ongoing and Future Conservation Actions	Responsible Party					Estimated Cost	
Continue habitat restoration and protection and research studies of LA black bears within historic range in Mississippi and Texas	FWS MDWFP TPWD					\$140,000	
Completion of 5-year review	FWS-ES					\$35,000	
Development of Statewide Nuisance Response Capability	LDWF (50% SWG)					\$59,000	
Nuisance Abatement Through proactive Community Development	LDWF					\$132,000	

***Denotes Agency receiving all or partial support with FWS funds; otherwise agencies are contributing additional funding (not shown here).**

Role of other Agencies: Delisting the LA black bear is a priority for the Secretary of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) and that agency is committing significant resources to that effort including public education and outreach, and research funding received via FWS recovery funds, ESA Section 6 and State Wildlife Grants. The USDA Natural Resources is a major contributor to habitat restoration and protection via its WRP program. The Black Bear Conservation Committee continues to be involved in Louisiana black bear recovery activities including public outreach and education and habitat restoration via the FWS Private Stewardship Program.

Role of Other ESA Programs: ESA Section 4 (Recovery or flex funding), ESA Section 6 (Conservation Funds)

Role of Other FWS Programs: National Wildlife Refuges manage habitat, support research and repatriation, restore habitat, and conduct outreach. State Wildlife Grant Program, Partners for Fish and Wildlife; Law Enforcement;

Revised Action Plan Due: July 17, 2014

Acronyms:

BBCC – Black Bear Conservation Committee

CRP – NRCS Conservation Reserve Program

ES – FWS Ecological Services
FWS - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
LDWF - LA Dept. of Wildlife and Fisheries
LE - FWS Law Enforcement
MDWFP – MS Dept. Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks
PFW - FWS Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program
NRCS – Natural Resources Conservation Service
NWR – FWS National Wildlife Refuges
TPWD – Texas Parks and Wildlife Department
USGS – U.S. Geological Survey, Southern Appalachian Research Branch
UT – University of Tennessee
WRP – NRCS Wetland Reserve Program
WS – U.S. Dept. of Agriculture Wildlife Services