



**For Immediate Release:
January 21, 2022**

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WA Commission Buckles to Extremist Pressure to Reverse Vote on 2022 Spring Bear Hunt

Seattle, WA – Taking advantage of two empty seats that Governor Jay Inslee is expected to fill any day, the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission buckled to pressure from extremist hunting groups Friday and voted to take steps to reverse its November decision not to hold a 2022 spring bear hunt.

“This vote was yet another embarrassment for our state, which shows once more that the current Commission cannot be trusted with the responsibility of managing our fish and wildlife,” said [Washington Wildlife First](#) Executive Director Samantha Bruegger. “We have no doubt this decision will generate widespread outrage, and ultimately help shine the spotlight on the urgent need for an overhaul of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.”

On November 19, 2021, the Commission voted 4-4 not to approve the rule that would have established a 2022 spring bear hunt. The vote was tied because Governor Inslee has not appointed anyone to fill the eastern Washington Commission seat vacated on December 31, 2020, which at that time left one open seat on the nine-member Commission.

Thousands of people weighed in during the rulemaking process to oppose the trophy hunt, which exploits the bear population during its most sensitive period and orphans bear cubs and leaves them to starve. Commissioners who voted against the hunt emphasized the failure of Department managers to substantiate the purported “management need” for the hunt, and voiced concern that management’s assertions contradict the Department’s own published science, annual game reports, and game management plan.

Following the vote, extremist hunting groups launched a vicious campaign against those Commissioners, specifically targeting recent appointees Fred Koontz and Lorna Smith. Those [attacks](#) demanded that Koontz and Smith be thrown off the Commission, called for them to be “hung,” claimed there is “no bag limit on politicians,” and targeted Commissioner Smith with countless gender-based attacks, including accusing her of being a “nasty woman” who was “emotional” and “hysterical.” Some Commissioners and Department staff, notably including Commissioner Kim Thorburn, publicly encouraged these extremist groups and coached them on how to reverse the decision.

Shortly afterwards, Commissioner Koontz announced his resignation in a letter that questioned whether he could have a “meaningful role” in that kind of environment, and which observed that the Commission is “stuck in a politicized quagmire” and has “largely lost the ability to have civil public conversations.”

During Friday’s debate, Commissioner Barbara Baker said the story behind Koontz’s resignation was “his story to tell,” but that “we all saw the intimidation, threats, and public ridicule that he was subject to merely for having the audacity to ask some questions.”

Commission Chair Larry Carpenter joined Commissioners Baker and Koontz in opposing Friday's decision, which took advantage of Koontz's departure to reverse the November decision by a 4-3 margin. A lifetime hunter, Commissioner Carpenter called the vote "irresponsible," and said it does not pass the "red-faced test."

"We could not agree more with Commissioner Carpenter that Friday's action gives the Commission a 'black eye,'" Bruegger said. "This vote implicitly condones the bullying behavior of people such as Commissioner Thorburn and the threats of extremist groups, which collectively forced Commissioner Koontz to resign, and then seized upon that vacancy to bring back a hunt that the vast majority of people oppose."

The Commissioners who opposed Friday's reversal noted that it would jeopardize the Commission's credibility and feed doubts about its continuing viability, just as multiple bills are moving forward in the legislature to reform and perhaps abolish the Commission. Commissioner Baker called these bills the equivalent of a "vote of no confidence."

But Friday's vote is not the end of the story. The Department must now propose a new rule to allow the 2022 spring bear hunt, which must go through the full public notice-and-comment rulemaking process, and then come before the Commission for a new vote. The Commission is likely to have new members before that vote, and they will ultimately decide whether the 2022 spring hunt will go forward.

Washington Wildlife First has long joined with other fish and wildlife advocacy organizations in asking Governor Inslee to fill the eastern Washington Commission seat. On December 19, 2021, following the resignation of Commissioner Koontz, 30 fish, wildlife, and environmental advocacy groups [signed a joint letter](#) calling for Governor Inslee to immediately fill both vacant seats, by selecting Commissioners who understand and value science, will conserve and protect our environment, and will focus on bringing critically needed reforms to the Department.

"There is no doubt that the longstanding vacancies on the Commission have undermined its credibility, and laid the foundation for the shameful display that we just saw," Bruegger said. "We can only hope Governor Inslee will rectify this situation very soon, by appointing Commissioners who will conduct themselves with honesty, integrity, and decorum, and take their roles as public trustees seriously."