

State of California
Natural Resources Agency
Addendum to the *2004 Environmental Document*
Regarding Bear Hunting

Title 14, California Code of Regulations
Sections 365, 366, 708.12
2026 Hunting Season

Prepared by:

California Department of Fish and Wildlife

On behalf of:

California Fish and Game Commission,
as lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act

December 2025

(OAL Notice File No. **Z2026-0113-07**)

Introduction

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) has prepared this addendum pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Public Resources Code Section 21000 et seq., to inform consideration by the California Fish and Game Commission (Commission) of proposed amendments to existing regulations governing bear hunting in California (California Code of Regulations (CCR), Title 14, sections 365, 366, and 708.12). California Fish and Game Code (F&G Code) Section 3950, subsection (a), designates bear as a game mammal in California.

F&G Code Section 203 authorizes the Commission to fix the area or areas, seasons and hours, bag and possession limit, sex, and total number of bears that may be taken pursuant to its regulations. F&G Code Section 203.1 requires the Commission to consider populations, habitat, food supplies, the welfare of individual animals, and other pertinent facts when establishing hunting regulations for bears. The Commission establishes bear hunting tag quotas through regulations, amended as needed, based on population estimates derived from surveys by CDFW.

The Commission serves as the CEQA lead agency when it promulgates and amends bear hunting regulations (Public Resources Code, Section 21067; CEQA Guidelines Section 15367).¹ The Commission established regulations for bear hunting in California in 2004 with the certification of a final environmental document under CEQA (2004 Bear Hunting ED; SCH No. 2003112080). The 2004 Bear Hunting ED provides relevant and important informational value to the Commission as it considers proposed amendments to the existing regulations for bear hunting in California. This addendum documents the Commission's consideration of related environmental effects for 2026 and subsequent hunt seasons.

Earlier Project Approval

CEQA review of the proposed project was conducted in accordance with the Commission's certified regulatory program approved by the secretary for the California Natural Resources Agency pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 21080.5 (see generally Title 14, CCR Section 781.5 and subsection (b) of Section 15251). CEQA requires all public agencies in the State to evaluate the environmental impacts of discretionary projects they propose to carry out or approve, including promulgating regulations, which may have a potential to significantly affect the environment.

In 2004, as part of its review and adoption of bear hunting regulations, the Commission certified the 2004 Bear Hunting ED as the lead agency under CEQA, focusing on the potential for significant environmental impacts from expanding the bear hunt zone east of Highway 395 in Mono County. The Commission determined that adopting the amended regulations as proposed would not result in any new significant or substantially more severe environmental effects, using a population model based solely on age-at-harvest data (Fraser 1976).

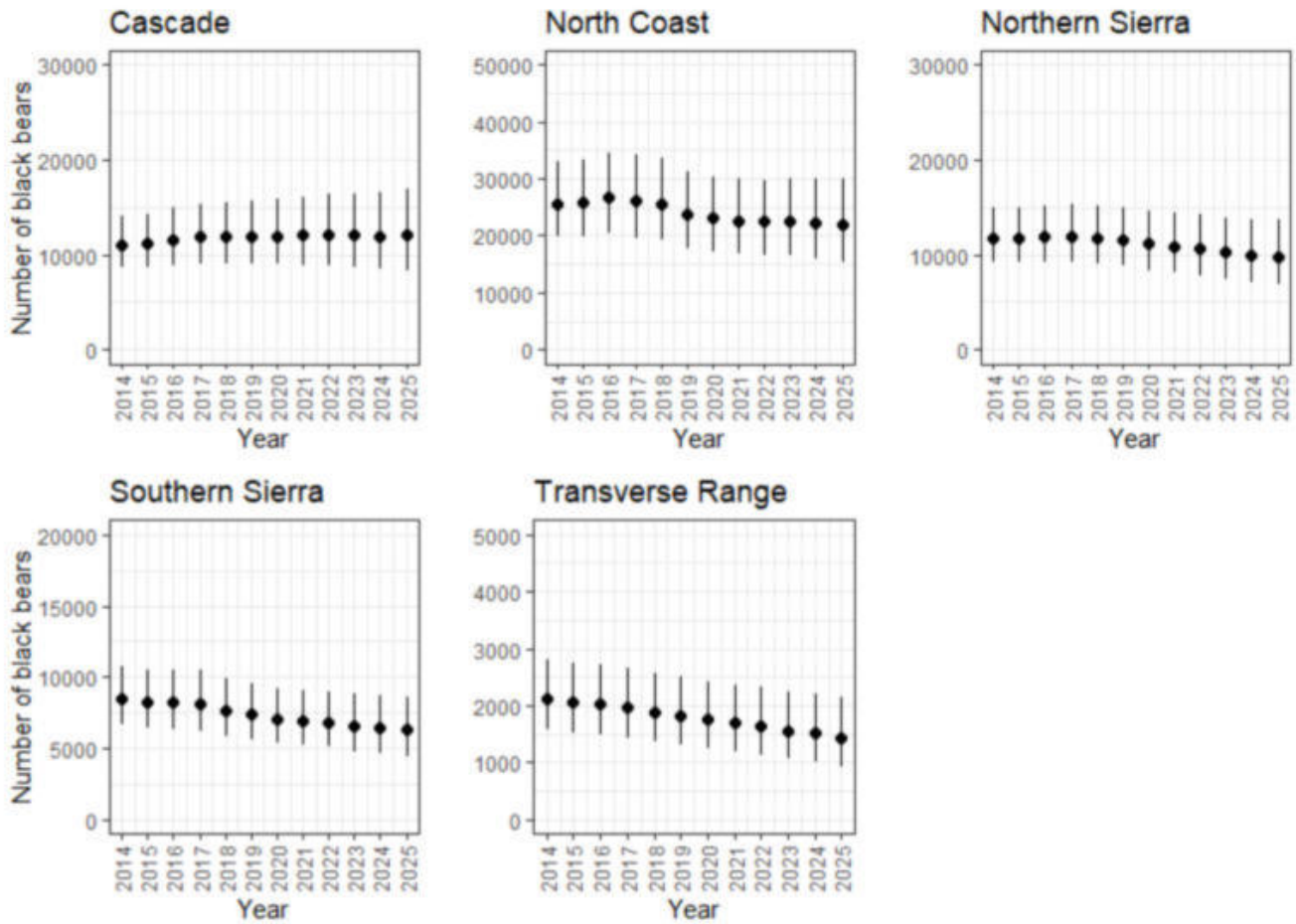
¹ The "CEQA Guidelines" are found in Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations, commencing with section 15000.

Integrated Population Model

The Fraser 1976 model was not robust to changes in hunter effort (e.g. resulting from the 2012 ban on the use of dogs to hunt black bears) and significantly underestimated black bear population size in California. In 2024, CDFW developed a Bayesian integrated population model (IPM) to monitor California's black bear population (CDFW 2025a), replacing the age-at-harvest data population model, which significantly underestimated black bear population size in California. The IPM makes use of age-at-harvest data, as with the previous method, but also accounts for hunter effort and integrates auxiliary data from widespread camera trapping surveys, local density estimates, and informative prior distributions (i.e., outputs from the model are informed by estimates from rangewide black bear data) for vital rates. By combining multiple data streams and accounting for hunter effort, the IPM is robust to potential biases that may arise from relying solely on a single method. A peer-reviewed study focused on the IPM was published in 2025 (Connor et al. 2025).

Using the latest iteration of the IPM (which includes age-at-harvest data from 2024), CDFW estimates an average population size of 61,329 (90% CI: 49,720-72,660) black bears in California for the years 2020-2024 inclusive (CDFW 2025b). The population is stable overall: there is no evidence of a statistically significant change to population size statewide or within any Bear Conservation Region (BCR) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Annual black bear population estimates and 90% credible intervals for BCRs where there is currently hunting



Note: None of the population trends depicted in this figure are statistically significant (i.e., California’s black bear population is stable).

Proposed 2026 Changes for Black Bear Hunting

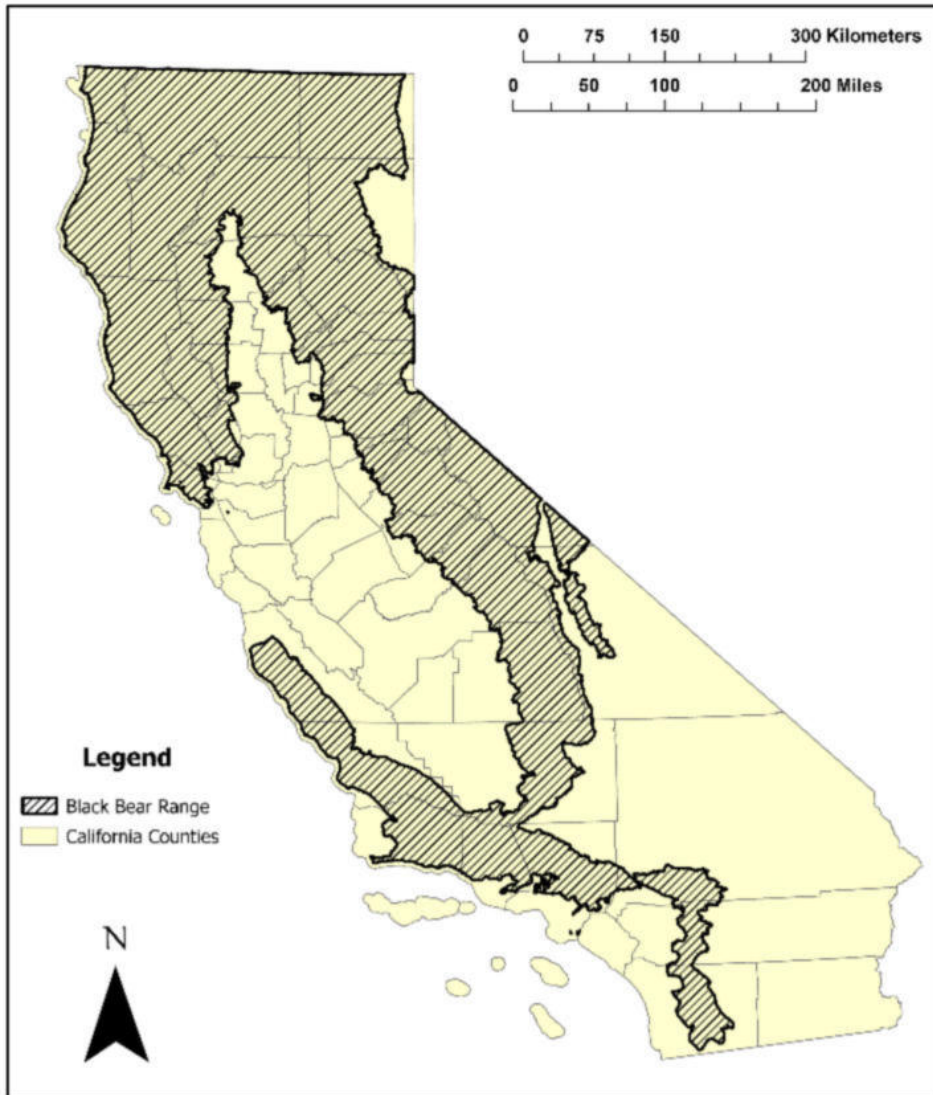
Hunt Area Expansion

Amendments to 365(a)(1) redefine the hunt area boundaries to include the entirety of Modoc and Lassen counties. Black bears have significantly expanded their range in California between 2004 and 2025 (Figure 2; Figure 3). There is a large and expanding black bear subpopulation (estimated at 2,300 animals; Figure 3) in northeastern California and considerable public interest in bear hunting in the area. Moreover, black bears in the Northeastern California BCR are not isolated from those in other parts of the state – recent genomics research reveals that black bears in California effectively form a single, healthy, and contiguous population without evidence of genetic isolation or inbreeding (CDFW unpublished data). Genetically, the population is on a north-to-south latitudinal cline and reflects high landscape connectivity.

Figure 2: Black bear range as displayed in the 2004 Bear Hunting ED



Figure 3: Updated black bear range as presented in the Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (CDFW 2025c), reflecting the species' expansion across various parts of the state

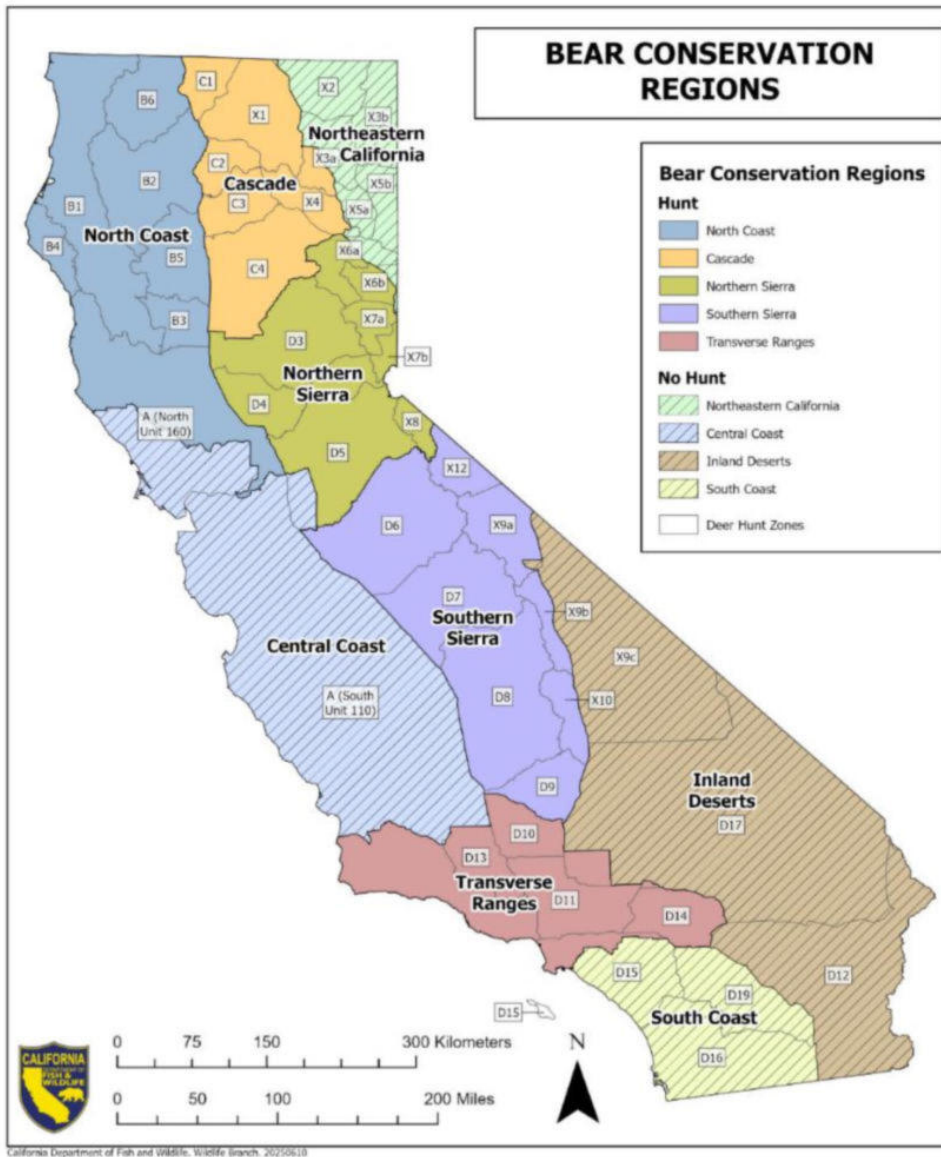


The proposal, if implemented, would be a strategic tool to increase hunter opportunity without impact to the bear population nor adjusting the harvest threshold. The proposal is unlikely to significantly increase harvest considering current methods of take in California and the open, arid habitat and climate of the Northeastern California BCR. The proposed expanded hunt area will add the Northeastern California Bear Conservation Region (Figure 4), as defined in the Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (CDFW 2025c), to the hunt zone.

Specific safeguards included in the proposed project will ensure that bear harvest will be at a level below the state's population sustained-yield capabilities. These safeguards include an in-season closure mechanism when 1,700 bears are reported harvested. CDFW is notified weekly via an automated email what the bear harvest total is, and a staff member enters the data on a continuous basis as harvest is reported. The season ends when the harvest total hits 1,700 or on the last Sunday of December, whichever comes first. Because the reporting deadline is February 1, some reports come in well after the season ends; thus, there is a

chance harvest slightly exceeds 1,700. Yet, even if the 1,700 threshold were to be reached, the harvest rate would be around 2.8%, which is far below a level that would significantly impact the population (up to 20%). The harvest threshold has not been exceeded since the use of dogs to hunt black bears was discontinued in 2012.

Figure 4: Bear Conservation Regions as defined in the Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California (CDFW 2025c)



Proposed Tag License Quantity Increase

Amendments to subsection 365(c) change the possession limit to be twice the daily bag limit of one legal bear per day, i.e., allow hunters to harvest two legal bears in a license year. Amendments to subsection 366(c) change the possession limit to be twice the daily bag limits,

specific to the archery season. Additionally, the amendments add subsections 365(c)(2) and 366(c)(2) to state that hunters may not be in possession of more than one bear gall bladder, as such possession is prima facie evidence that bear gall bladders are possessed for sale.

Amendments to section 708.12(a)(4) allow for the purchase of up to two bear license tags during any one license year. The tags can be purchased at the same time or at different times. The harvest threshold of 1,700 has not been reached since 2012 and the current possession limit is one adult bear per hunting license year. The purpose of the proposal is to increase hunter opportunity without impacting the population nor changing the harvest threshold by increasing the possession limit to two. It will also provide opportunities for hunters to harvest two bears in a single season.

The proposal is not expected to result in a significant increase in black bear harvest. Even if the harvest were to increase, the season would close once harvest hits 1,700 which is far below a level (up to 20%) that would significantly impact the population. This critical threshold was used in the 2004 Bear Hunting ED, which this document is an addendum to, and remains valid.

References

CDFW. (2025a). Interim Black Bear Take Report 2021-2023. URL:

<https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=231210&inline>

CDFW. (2025b). 2025 Black Bear Program Annual Report.

CDFW. (2025c). Black Bear Conservation and Management Plan for California. URL:

<https://nrm.dfg.ca.gov/FileHandler.ashx?DocumentID=231227&inline>

Connor, T., Dheer, A., Dorcy-Ponce, J., Steinbeiser, C., Landers, R., Klip, M., & Furnas, B. (2025). Estimating wildlife populations and their dynamics using multiple data sources and a hierarchical integrated model: The case of California's black bears. *Ecological Solutions and Evidence*, 6(3), e70076. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/2688-8319.70076>

Fraser, D. (1976). An estimate of hunting mortality based on the age and sex structure of the harvest. In *Trans. North Am. Moose Conf. Workshop* (Vol. 12, pp. 236-273).

No Subsequent Environmental Document is Required

In general, CEQA applies whenever a public agency proposes to carry out or approve a discretionary project. (Public Resources Code, Section 21080(a)). CEQA provides that, where a public agency proposes to modify a previously approved project for which a final environmental document was prepared and certified:

“The lead agency or a responsible agency shall prepare an **addendum** to a previously certified EIR if some changes or additions are necessary but none of the conditions described in Section 15162 calling for preparation of a subsequent EIR have occurred.” (Title 14, CCR Section 15164)

A “subsequent ED” (Section 15162) is required when there is substantial evidence that:

- Substantial changes are proposed in the project, which will require major revisions to the previous environmental impact report (EIR) or ED.

- Substantial changes occur with respect to the circumstances under which the project is being undertaken, which will require major revisions to the previous EIR or environmental documentation.
- New information, which was not known and could not have been known at the time the previous EIR or ED was certified as complete, becomes available.

A “supplement to an ED” (Section 15163) is appropriate when:

- A subsequent ED is not required.
- Only minor changes to the project are described.
- Only that information to make the ED adequate is provided.

An “addendum to the certified ED” (Section 15164) is proper when:

- The changes or additions presented in this project are necessary, but none of the conditions described in Section 15162 calling for preparation of a subsequent ED have occurred.

The Commission may properly prepare and may rely on an addendum in accordance with Section 15164 to fulfill its obligations under CEQA.

No Additional Impacts Under CEQA

The Commission has determined that amending the current bear hunting regulations will not result in any new or significant or substantially more severe environmental impacts than previously analyzed and disclosed in the 2004 Bear Hunting ED for this project.

This project does not have the potential to degrade the quality of the environment, substantially reduce the habitat of a fish or wildlife species, cause a fish or wildlife population to drop below self-sustaining levels, threaten to eliminate a plant or animal community, reduce the number or restrict the range of rare or endangered plant or animal, or eliminate important examples of the major periods of California history or prehistory. There are no impacts to the habitat of fish and wildlife species.

This approval action expands the area where black bear may be hunted and increases the number of bear tags a hunter may purchase and use from one to two. No other aspect of the project has changed. No new significant or substantially more severe impacts under CEQA will occur due to these changes.

Amendment of the Bear Hunting Regulations

The Commission subjected the draft to its own review and analysis. Based on that review and analysis, the draft reflects the independent judgment of the Commission and fulfills the Commission’s responsibilities. In conclusion, the Commission finds that amending the bear hunting regulations in CCR, Title 14, sections 365, 366 and 708.12 will not result in any new significant or substantially more severe environmental effects than previously analyzed and disclosed in the 2004 Bear Hunting ED. The Commission also finds that subsequent or supplemental review beyond this addendum is not warranted pursuant to the CCR, Title 14, Section 15164, in connection with this proposed action.

Melissa A. Miller-Henson

Melissa Miller-Henson, Executive Director
California Fish and Game Commission

April 23, 2026

Date