

Ending the Unsporting, Unsafe, and Reckless Practice of Bear Baiting on Federal Lands

Background on the Don't Feed the Bears Act of 2025

The Don't Feed the Bears Act of 2025, by U.S. Rep. Shri Thanedar, D-Mich., would stop the intentional feeding of bears on federal public lands, effectively ending the unsporting and reckless practice of setting out piles of food garbage for bears and then ambushing them while they feed. The legislation is a remedy to concerns from federal land managers, wildlife biologists, animal welfare advocates, and conservation-minded hunters that baiting bears is not only unsafe because it habituates these powerful animals to human-scented foods, but also inconsistent with principles of fair chase and the norms of wildlife management.



The U.S. Forest Service warns visitors to “never feed bears” because food-conditioned animals are more likely to lose their natural wariness and become dangerous. Yet based on the most recent hunting data, at least 16,000 bears are killed over bait each year, with more than 10,000 of those kills occurring on federal lands. In states where baiting is legal, it is often the dominant hunting method, accounting for more than half of all bears taken.

Bear baiting involves putting out large quantities of food — grease, donuts, meats, candy, molasses, sugar beets, and other high-calorie foods — to lure bears in for an easy kill, often at point-blank range while their heads are buried in bait piles. Feeding bears is precisely the sort of human behavior that wildlife managers warn private citizens not to do. One bear baiting guide reports that he alone leaves 18 tons of food in the woods per year for bears.

“A fed bear is a dead bear,” reads the blaring warnings to hikers, campers, photographers, and other people entering bear country. For every bear shot over a bait site, there may be dozens who visit the garbage pile when it’s unattended by a hunter, learning the lesson that human food waste is something to seek out in the future.

Just prior to the voter-approved ban on baiting in Oregon in 1994, Charles Odegaard, the Regional Director of the Pacific Northwest Region of the National Park Service, wrote the following to the Forest Service: “The practice of bear baiting [on adjacent national forests] has a direct negative impact on Crater Lake National Park. At some times the park boundary is almost ringed with bear baiting stations. Bears are wide-ranging animals. Stations placed within a few feet of the park boundary on a consistent and regular basis are inevitably an attractant that lures bears from the park.” He added that “there is no difference between a bait station and a dump” and that “bait stations habituate bears to human-generated food, contributing to the potential for conflicts between bears and people in the park.” In many cases, especially in the West, national parks are often ringed by national forests.

Bear Baiting Is Rotten at Its Core

In the weeks before hunting season, baiters set up stations — often barrels or mounds of food — and maintain them with daily or weekly refills to create a predictable feeding pattern. Hunters typically wait in tree stands or blinds near the bait, eliminating the need for tracking or woodsmanship. Many states allow baiting in the fall, when bears typically consume up to 20,000 calories a day to prepare for hibernation, making them especially vulnerable.

Studies have found that in parts of northern Wisconsin, more than 40 percent of the diet of hunter-killed bears consists of bait. Baiting also attracts other wildlife, including wolves, coyotes, moose, deer, and birds, disrupting natural foraging patterns and unnaturally concentrating animals around these supplemental feeding sites.

Where Bear Baiting is Legal

Bear baiting is legal in 13 states, and eight allow it on federal lands, including U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands (Alaska, Idaho, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Utah, Wisconsin, and Wyoming). But notably, baiting and hounding are not allowed in several states where bear hunting is most popular (e.g., California, Colorado, Montana, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington). Grizzly bears, protected under the Endangered Species Act in the lower 48 states, may be hunted over bait in Alaska, setting up a particularly dangerous circumstance with the immensely powerful bruins habituated to human foods and drawn to people and their foods. For the second time in the last decade—after the first effort was undone by a subsequent Administration—the National Park Service in 2024 banned bear baiting on 20 million acres of national preserves in Alaska.

There is nothing distinctive about the bear baiting states that require that practice for successful hunting. The forests of Oregon and Washington — which banned bear baiting more than a quarter century ago — have seen bear hunting boom in the states, and these states have the thickest forests in the nation. Colorado and Montana are perhaps the two archetypical Rocky Mountain states, and if hunters can pursue bears

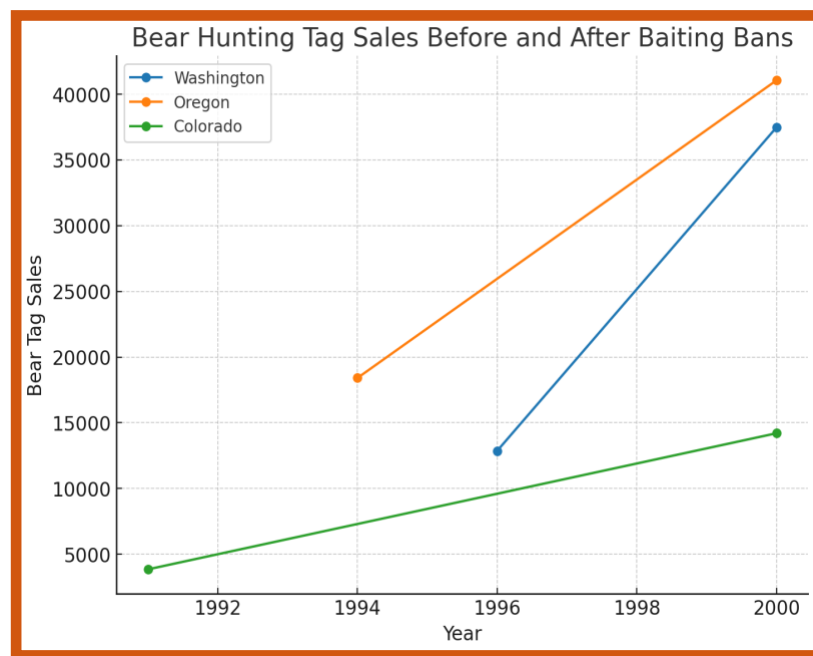
successfully in those states in the Rockies, they can do so in Idaho and Wyoming, too. Pennsylvania has the largest population of bear hunters precisely because it forbids baiting and hounding. Its forests are no less dense than those in Michigan, Minnesota, or Michigan.

Ethical and Ecological Concerns

Bear baiting violates the widely recognized North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and the principle of fair chase, which calls for the “ethical, sportsmanlike pursuit of free-ranging wild game animals in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper advantage.” Baiting removes the essence of pursuit, conditions bears to human foods and allows the shooting of a feeding animal at close range.

The Intermountain Region of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) covers Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming — the only conterminous western states that still allow bear baiting. As long ago as 1990, Stan Tixier, then the forester for that region, declared that the Northern and Intermountain Regions of the USFS “oppose the continuation of bear baiting as a sport hunting practice.”

The National Park Service, in its 2024 rule banning bear baiting on Alaska national preserves, explained: “This rule will lower the probability of visitors encountering a bait station



where bears may attack to defend a food source. Further, this rule will lower the risk that bears will associate food at bait stations with humans and become conditioned to eating human-produced foods, thereby creating a public safety concern.” Habituation to human foods also causes bears to raid campgrounds, cabins, and cars. These bears often must be killed as threats to human safety — an indirect form of killing attributed to bear baiting.

Orphaned Cubs

In states that allow spring bear baiting — Alaska, Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah — shooting lactating females decimates bear populations because young cubs are still dependent on their mothers for milk and protection. Cubs born in springtime can usually survive if their mothers are shot in the fall, but not earlier.

More than 25 years ago, bear biologists from six western states disputed the argument that baiting allows sex-selective killing of bears. In a paper published in the Proceedings of the Western Black Bear Workshop, the biologists said “it is quite difficult to accurately determine nursing status on free-ranging black bears, even when a bear is in a tree or at a bait. The appearance of nursing females in the kill each spring supports

this notion. During the last year of spring bear hunting in Colorado, the number of nursing female black bears checked was within three of the number predicted based on breeding rate of females and total female kill. In other words, there was no selection even with regulations prohibiting the taking of nursing females.”


Public Land Use Contradictions, Wrong-Headed Exceptions

A camper in Yellowstone can face a \$5,000 fine and six months in jail for leaving food unsecured where a bear might get it. Yet in some national forests abutting that national park and others, hunters can legally dump hundreds of pounds of human food for weeks — so long as the goal is to shoot the bear.

This double standard undermines decades of public education, erodes trust in federal wildlife policy, and fuels the very conflicts that agencies then spend public money to address. Far from being necessary for hunter-success or wildlife management, bear baiting induces precisely the kinds of food-conditioned, human-habituated behaviors that agencies deem problematic.

In the last 50 years, the states that took initiative to ban bear baiting did not see a decrease in the annual take of bears. But they saw a range of

Federal Lands in Alaska that currently or until recently allowed bear baiting of black bears (*Ursus americanus*), grizzly bears, and brown bears (*Ursus arctos*)



Federal Agency	Dept	Acres (millions)	Black bear baiting	Grizzly & brown bear baiting	Comments
Bureau of Land Mgmt.	Interior	73	✓ Legal under state regs	✓ Legal under state regs	
National Wildlife Refuges	Interior	77	✓ Legal under state regs	✗ Brown & grizzly banned	“Kenai Rule” (2016) prohibits <i>brown bear baiting</i> , upheld by courts. “Spot-and-stalk” grizzly hunting permitted
National Parks	Interior	33	✗ No hunting	✗ No hunting	
National Preserves	Interior	22	✗ Not allowed	✗ Not allowed	June 28, 2024: National Park Service finalized rule banning bear baiting for sport hunters in all Alaska NPS Preserves
US Forest Service	Agriculture	22	✓ Legal under state regs	✓ Legal under state regs	
Totals		224			Alaska encompasses 424.5 million total acres.

other benefits, including surges in hunting participation. In 1996, the last year baiting was allowed in Washington, there were 12,868 bear tag purchasers. In 2000, four years after the initiative passed, 37,484 bear tags were purchased — a threefold increase. In Oregon, 18,412 tags were sold in 1994, the last year of baiting, and by 2000, tag sales had more than doubled to 41,060. In Colorado, in 1991, the last year of baiting, there were 3,852 bear hunters, and by 2000, there was a nearly fourfold increase in tag sales to 14,207. It is apparent that more hunters chose to participate because they no longer felt that baiting interfered with fair chase. These states experienced a windfall of additional hunting license revenue.

In states where the hunt is stacked with bait or dogs, bear hunting licenses are far fewer and commercial hunting guides dominate the action, catering to out-of-state hunters who may pay \$10,000 or more to shoot a trophy bear in a guaranteed kill. In Pennsylvania, which allows no baiting or hounding, there are 100,000 licensed hunters who participate in bear hunting. In Virginia, the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries banned bear baiting in 1999, successfully transitioning away from this practice. In its rationale for these new standards, the Department acknowledged that “To protect the public, as well as bears, the department needs to avoid the dangers of conditioning bears to finding food around homes. Artificial feeding and resulting concentrations of black bears has been identified to increase both nuisance complaints and chances of bears injuring humans.”

The Path Forward

The United States has important federal wildlife policies, and it is the United States that provides an enormous share of funding for state wildlife agencies through the Pittman-Robertson Act and Dingell-Johnson Act.

- The United States banned hunting most wildlife using aircraft in 1971, when Congress passed the Airborne Hunting Act (16 U.S.C. §§ 742j–1). The law made it illegal to shoot, harass, or attempt to capture any bird, fish, or other animal from an aircraft, or to use aircraft to spot and relay the

location of wildlife for the purpose of hunting. It was enacted largely in response to widespread public opposition to aerial gunning of predators — especially bears and wolves — in Alaska and the western states.

- The United States banned baiting of waterfowl in 1935 under the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act regulations, with the rules later clarified and strengthened in the 1936 amendments to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act regulations. The ban was a direct response to concerns from the U.S. Biological Survey (predecessor to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service) that feeding or baiting ducks and geese concentrated birds unnaturally, made hunting unsporting, and risked overharvest of already declining populations. Since then, federal regulations have consistently prohibited hunting waterfowl “by the aid of baiting, or on or over any baited area,” with only very narrow exceptions for normal agricultural practices.

The Don’t Feed the Bears Act builds on these important traditions, addressing an abusive, unsporting feeding practices that adversely affects wildlife and puts human visitors to federal lands at risk of attack. The federal government is the entity that warns visitors not to feed bears, so why should it suspend its admonitions just when someone is motivated to make money by offering a guaranteed kill of a bear?

The bill mandates enforcement of existing feeding bans in National Park Service units and National Wildlife Refuges in the lower 48 states and requires the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture to adopt regulations to end bear baiting on U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands. Baiting is not popular in Alaska, and it’s especially dangerous for a state dependent on wildlife-watching tourism to habituate both grizzly bears and black bears to human food sources and risk encounters that could strike fear into outdoor enthusiasts. Ending the practice will reduce dangerous encounters, protect wildlife, and ensure that America’s federal lands are managed for the benefit of all — not just for the small minority who seek an easy kill over a pile of donuts and grease.