

October 22, 2026

An Open Letter to Colorado Voters from Bear and Wildlife Biologists

In 1992, approximately 70% of Colorado voters approved a [ballot initiative](#) prohibiting spring bear hunting, bear baiting, and hunting bears with hounds. The measure reflected concerns about protecting female bears with dependent cubs and preserving fair-chase hunting.

On November 3, Coloradans will vote on Amendment 83, which would establish a constitutional right to hunt and fish using “traditional methods.” [Amendment 83 proponents](#) have expressed interest in restoring these three prohibited practices, including bear baiting, hound hunting, and spring bear hunting, arguing that [predators such as bears must be controlled to produce more game](#).

Passage of Amendment 83 would not automatically repeal the 1992 restrictions. However, its broad, undefined language and elevated status as a constitutional provision, rather than an ordinary statute, raise concerns about its potential to limit future legislation or ballot measures, affect hunting regulations, and [invite costly legal challenges to existing wildlife protections](#).

As bear biologists and wildlife professionals, we believe voters should understand the biological and wildlife-management implications of bear baiting, hound hunting, and spring bear hunting seasons.

Hunting Versus Killing

There is an important distinction between hunting an animal and simply making it easier to kill. Former Colorado bear biologist and lifelong hunter Tom Beck expressed this distinction when he said, [“I started thinking about the idea of hunting versus killing.”](#)

Fair-chase hunting requires woodsmanship, knowledge of bear behavior and habitat, and the skill to locate and approach an animal.

The practices prohibited in 1992 raise different concerns. Spring hunting can kill females with dependent cubs, leaving the young to starve. Baiting repeatedly attracts bears to predictable locations using calorie-rich foods, sometimes including candy, pastries, and animal fat. Hunters then wait for bears to appear. Outdoor writer and lifelong hunter Ted Williams calls this practice [“garbaging for bears”](#) or “bruin assassination.” Hound hunting uses dogs to pursue bears, sometimes forcing them into trees where they can be easily shot.

Feeding Bears Contradicts Modern Bear Management

Peer-reviewed research demonstrates that bear baiting can substantially alter bear feeding behavior. A Wisconsin study found that hunting bait accounted for more than [40% of the diets of sampled black bears](#). A [2024 scientific assessment](#) identified food conditioning, defensive behavior at bait stations, and increased human–bear conflicts as important risks.

For decades, wildlife agencies, including Colorado Parks and Wildlife, have warned against feeding bears: “*A fed bear is a dead bear.*” Encouraging bears to consume human-supplied foods through baiting raises serious questions about consistency with this fundamental wildlife-management principle.

These concerns are especially relevant in 2026. Drought and adverse weather have reduced natural bear foods across parts of Colorado, including berries, fruits, and Gambel oak acorns. During autumn hyperphagia, when bears urgently accumulate fat for winter, food shortages can drive hungry animals into communities. Colorado has experienced unusually high numbers of [bear sightings and human–bear conflict reports](#) this year.

Federal Wildlife Experts Have Raised Similar Concerns

In July 2024, the National Park Service prohibited bear baiting for sport hunting in Alaska's national preserves, citing risks to public safety, natural bear behavior, and wildlife conservation.

The agency relied on expert consultations from 14 National Park Service wildlife professionals and 28 outside bear specialists. The agency concluded that baiting could condition bears to associate humans with food, potentially increasing dangerous human–bear encounters and subsequent bear mortality.

All 28 outside bear specialists agreed that bear baiting was functionally equivalent to feeding bears.

Three Decades of Successful Bear Hunting

Colorado's experience since 1992 demonstrates that substantial and successful bear harvests are possible without spring hunting, baiting, or hounds.

Before the 1992 prohibitions, hunters killed an annual average of approximately 471 bears during 1989–1991. During 2002–2004, the average increased to 656. More recently, annual harvests have often exceeded 1,100 bears.

For more than three decades, Colorado has maintained the fair-chase bear-hunting restrictions its voters adopted in 1992. Proposals that could weaken those protections deserve careful scrutiny of their consequences for dependent cubs, hunting ethics, bear behavior, and human safety.

Colorado's experience shows that substantial bear harvests can occur under existing fair-chase restrictions. The biological justification for restoring previously prohibited methods remains an important question for voters to consider.

Respectfully,

The undersigned bear biologists, wildlife scientists, and conservation professionals offer these observations based on their collective expertise in bear ecology, wildlife management, and conservation.

Dr. Chris Darimont

Conservation Scientist and Research Director, Raincoast Conservation Foundation; Raincoast Chair in Applied Conservation Science, University of Victoria

Dr. Stephen F. Stringham

Bear Communication & Coexistence Research Program; Founder, WildWatch

Steve Nadeau

Former Wildlife Biologist, Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Idaho's First Wolf Manager; Grizzly Recovery Specialist

Dr. Simon Gadbois

Wildlife Ethology & Canine Olfaction Lab, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

Dr. John Schoen

Wildlife Ecologist; Former Research Wildlife Biologist, Alaska Department of Fish and Game; Pioneer in Coastal Brown Bear Research

Elaine Leslie

Former Chief, Biological Resources Division, National Park Service; Executive Council, Coalition to Protect America's National Parks

Dr. Gordon M. Burghardt

Alumni Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus, University of Tennessee, Knoxville; Former President, Animal Behavior Society; Founding Field Chief Editor, *Frontiers in Ethology*

Frank Buono

Former Deputy Superintendent, Joshua Tree National Park; Founder and Director, National Park Integrity Project

Tim Thier

Former Wildlife Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, with 27 years of research on black bears, grizzly bears, and other wildlife; Former Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Dr. Paul Paquet

Senior Conservation Scientist and Associate Research Director, Raincoast Conservation Foundation; Adjunct Professor, University of Victoria

Dr. Jennifer Vonk

Distinguished Professor, Oakland University, Michigan; Researcher in Animal Cognition and Comparative Psychology, including Black and Brown Bears

Dan Ashe

Former Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; President and CEO, Association of Zoos and Aquariums; Lifelong Hunter

Dr. Mark Pokras

Wildlife Veterinarian; Former Director, Wildlife Clinic and Center for Conservation Medicine, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University

Dr. Gilbert Proulx

Director of Science, Alpha Wildlife Research & Management Ltd.; Editor-in-Chief, *Canadian Wildlife Biology & Management*

Dr. Diana Lafferty

Conservation Scientist; Director, Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Science Lab; Associate Professor of Biology, Northern Michigan University

Dr. Sterling Miller

Former Research Bear Biologist, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, for 21 years; Former President, International Association for Bear Research and Management

Dr. Daniel Doak

Conservation Biologist and Population Ecologist; Professor and Byers Family Chair in Environmental Studies, University of Colorado Boulder

Dr. Jon Arnemo

Wildlife Veterinarian and Professor, University of Inland Norway; Researcher in Wildlife Management, Ecotoxicology, and Lead Exposure

Dr. Christopher Servheen

Former Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, for 35 years

Dr. Michael Soukup

Former Chief Scientist, National Park Service

Scientific Reference

Bear baiting risks and mitigations: An assessment using expert opinion analyses. PLOS ONE (2024).

[Read the peer-reviewed scientific assessment](#)