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**NEW JERSEY'S BLACK BEARS HAVE EMERGED FROM THEIR WINTER DENS;
DEP OFFERS TIPS ON REDUCING CONFLICTS WITH BEARS**

(11/P55) TRENTON – Black bears have exited their winter dens throughout New Jersey and are entering their most active period of the year as they search for food and mates, making encounters with humans in populated areas more likely. To reduce the risk of such encounters, State residents—especially those living in “bear country” in Northwest Jersey-- are urged to take some simple precautions.

“There are some common sense steps people can take to reduce the risk of interacting with bears and enhancing public safety,” said DEP Commissioner Bob Martin. “Most important is not to feed bears – intentionally or unintentionally. Bears that learn to associate food with people, and their homes and living areas, can become habituated to easy sources of food and become the nuisance bears that regularly forage in neighborhoods. That can result in troubling encounters.”

Intentionally feeding black bears is illegal in New Jersey and is punishable by a fine of up to \$1,000 per offense. The more common problem is the unintentional feeding of bears that occurs when homeowners’ unknowingly make garbage, pet foods and bird feed available for bears to find and eat.

“Properly securing trash and eliminating anything else a bear will eat is one of the best ways to prevent bears from being attracted to a home or property,” said David Chanda, director of the State Division of Fish and Wildlife.

The bear population in New Jersey has grown in recent years with bears sighted in all 21 counties, and bear-human encounters occurring more frequently in places outside of traditional bear country, including heavily populated and developed areas of the State.

To deal with that issue, a New Jersey Comprehensive Black Bear Management Policy was developed by the state’s Fish and Game Council and approved last year by Commissioner Martin. That policy emphasizes managing black bears through research and monitoring, non-lethal and lethal control of problem bears, public education on co-existing with bears, and includes an annual controlled hunt.

DEP wildlife experts are offering the following tips to minimize conflicts with bears this spring:

- Use certified bear-resistant garbage containers if possible. Otherwise, store all garbage in containers with tight-fitting lids and place them along the inside walls of your garage, basement, a sturdy shed or other secure area.
- Wash garbage containers frequently with a disinfectant solution to remove odors. Put out garbage on collection day, not the prior night.

- Avoid feeding birds when bears are active. If you choose to feed birds, do so during daylight hours only and bring feeders indoors at night. Suspend birdfeeders from a free-hanging wire, making sure they are at least 10 feet off the ground. Clean up spilled seeds and shells daily.
- Immediately remove all uneaten food and food bowls used by pets fed outdoors.
- Clean outdoor grills and utensils to remove food and grease residue to minimize odors. Store grills securely.
- Do not place meat or any sweet foods in compost piles.
- Remove fruit or nuts that fall from trees in your yard.
- Properly installed electric fencing is an effective way of protecting crops, beehives and livestock.

Wildlife experts also offer the following information:

- A black bear passing through a residential area should not be considered a problem, as long as it is behaving normally and not posing a threat.
- If you encounter a bear remain calm and do not run. Make sure the bear has an escape route. Avoid direct eye contact, back up slowly and speak with a low, assertive voice.
- Black bear attacks are extremely rare. Should a black bear attack, fight back. Do not play dead.

Report bear damage, nuisance behavior or aggressive bears to the Wildlife Control Unit of the DEP's Division of Fish and Wildlife at (908) 735-8793. During evenings and weekends, residents should call their local police department or the DEP Hotline at (877) WARN-DEP.

To learn more about New Jersey's black bears and ways to avoid problems with them, visit www.njfishandwildlife.com/bearinfo.htm.

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