

The Florida Senate
BILL ANALYSIS AND FISCAL IMPACT STATEMENT

(This document is based on the provisions contained in the legislation as of the latest date listed below.)

Prepared By: The Professional Staff of the Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

BILL: CS/SB 688

INTRODUCER: Environment and Natural Resources Committee and Senator Wright

SUBJECT: Illegal Taking and Possession of Bears

DATE: February 3, 2020 **REVISED:** _____

	ANALYST	STAFF DIRECTOR	REFERENCE	ACTION
1.	Dyson	Rogers	EN	Fav/CS
2.			CJ	
3.			RC	

Please see Section IX. for Additional Information:
COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTE - Substantial Changes

I. Summary:

CS/SB 688 creates a section of law that increases the penalty for taking or possessing a freshly killed bear from a Level Two violation (a second-degree misdemeanor for the first offense) to a Level Three violation (a first-degree misdemeanor for the first offense). The bill also makes a subsequent offender of such taking or possession permanently ineligible for any other permit or license issued by the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

The bill also makes the sale or attempted sale of a bear taken in violation of the section a Level Four violation (a third-degree felony).

II. Present Situation:

Florida Black Bear

The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is a subspecies of the American black bear (*Ursus americanus*)¹ that has historically ranged throughout Florida, southern Georgia, and southern Alabama.² Once roaming across Florida, the Florida black bear is now mainly located

¹ FWC, *Florida Black Bear Management Plan*, 1 (Oct. 8, 2019), available at <https://myfwc.com/media/21923/2019-draft-bear-management-plan.pdf>.

² *Id.*

in fragmented areas across the state covering about 49% of its historic range.³ Due to loss of habitat and unregulated hunting, the population was reduced to an estimated 300-500 bears during the 1970s.⁴ The massive population decline led to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to classify the Florida black bear as a threatened species in 1974.⁵

After more than 35 years of strict statewide protection and management, FWC conducted an evaluation and determined that the Florida black bear was no longer at risk for extinction. In 2012 the Florida black bear was removed from the state threatened species list.⁶

Population

The Florida black bear population is comprised of seven distinct sub-populations. They are Apalachicola; Eglin; Osceola; Ocala/St. Johns; Chassahowitzka; Highland/Glades; and Big Cypress.⁷ During 2014-2015, FWC conducted a statewide population assessment for Florida black bears and found that bear populations had increased substantially in certain sub-populations and increased by approximately 53 percent statewide.⁸ Even though the Florida black bear population is growing, the bears still only reside in the seven disconnected sub-groups across the state.⁹

Each subpopulation is separated into a bear management unit (BMU). A BMU is a geographic location bounded by county and/or state borders with one of the seven Florida black bear sub-populations within it.¹⁰ The goal of a BMU is to provide a defined area within which FWC can have a community-focused effort to effectively manage and conserve Florida black bears.¹¹ FWC estimates that the current population of the Florida black bear is over 4,000.¹² A map of the BMUs and Florida black bear habitats can be seen on the following page.¹³

³ FWC, *The Florida Black Bear; Appearance*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/bear/facts/appearance/> (last visited Nov. 12, 2019).

⁴ FWC, *Black Bear Research*, <http://myfwc.com/research/wildlife/terrestrial-mammals/bear/research/> (last visited Nov. 13, 2019).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ FWC, *Bear Management Plan*, 26-27 (Jun. 27, 2012), available at <https://myfwc.com/media/14741/bear-management-plan.pdf>.

⁷ FWC, *Florida Black Bear Management Plan*, xix (Oct. 8, 2019), available at <https://myfwc.com/media/21923/2019-draft-bear-management-plan.pdf>.

⁸ FWC, *Florida Black Bear: Numbers*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/bear/numbers/> (last visited Nov. 13, 2019).

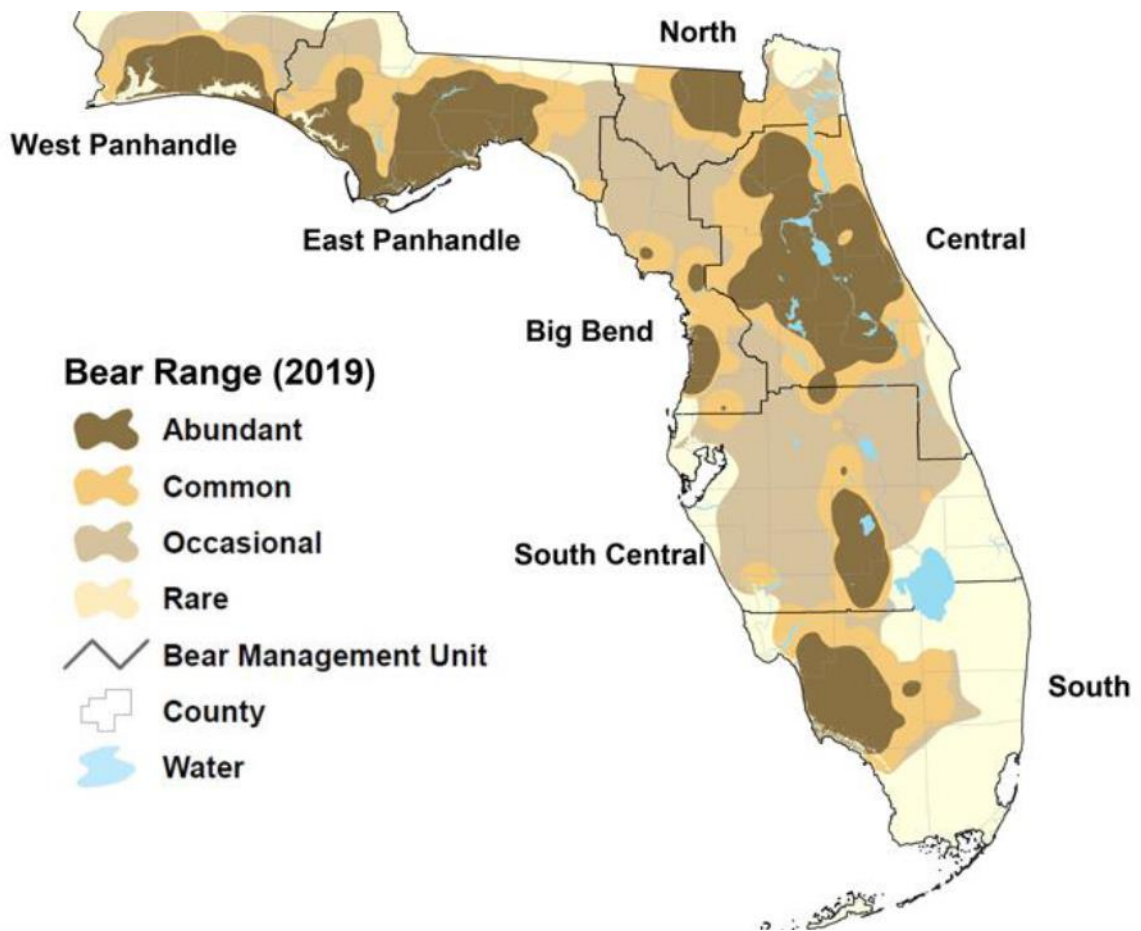
⁹ FWC, *Bear Management Plan*, vi (Jun. 27, 2012), available at <https://myfwc.com/media/14741/bear-management-plan.pdf>.

¹⁰ FWC, *BMU*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/bear/bmu/> (last visited Nov. 13, 2019).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² FWC, *Florida Black Bear Management Plan*, 1 (Oct. 8, 2019), available at <https://myfwc.com/media/21923/2019-draft-bear-management-plan.pdf>.

¹³ FWC, *Distribution Map*, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/wildlife/bear/living/distribution-map/> (last visited Nov. 13, 2019).



Habitat

The Florida black bear is adaptable and inhabits a variety of forested habitats but thrives in areas that provide seasonally available foods, secluded areas for denning, and some degree of protection from humans.¹⁴ The optimal bear habitat in Florida is a thoroughly interspersed mixture of flatwoods, swamps, scrub oak ridges, bayheads, and hammock habitats.¹⁵

Hunting as a Management Tool

In 2015, FWC authorized the first bear hunt, opening the East Panhandle, North, Central, and South BMUs to a limited hunt.¹⁶ In 2016, FWC staff considered four options regarding the hunting of Florida black bears.¹⁷ These options included: using the same framework for the 2016 hunt as was used in 2015; authorizing a more conservative bear hunt utilizing input received from the public and stakeholders; postponing bear hunting in Florida; or prohibiting bear hunting in Florida for future years.¹⁸ FWC ultimately decided to postpone the bear hunt for 2016 with the

¹⁴ FWC, *Bear Management Plan*, 8 (Jun. 27, 2012), available at <https://myfwc.com/media/14741/bear-management-plan.pdf>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ FWC, *2015 Florida Black Bear Summary Report*, 1, available at <https://myfwc.com/media/13669/2015-florida-black-bear-hunt-report.pdf>.

¹⁷ FWC, *FWC to Consider Staff Recommendation for Florida Bear Hunt, Four Options on How to Move Forward* (Jun. 10, 2016), available at https://myfwc.com/media/16630/fwc-to-consider-staff-recommendation-for-florida-bear-hunt-four-options-on-how-to-move-forward_061016.pdf.

¹⁸ *Id.*

option to reopen discussion at a later date.¹⁹ Currently, there is no season where bear hunting is authorized in the state.

Penalties for Taking or Sale of Wildlife

Under Art. IV, s. 9 of the Florida Constitution, FWC is granted the authority to exercise the regulatory and executive powers of the state with respect to wild animal life, fresh water aquatic life, and marine life. The Legislature may enact laws that aid FWC in its exercise of regulatory functions and executive powers in the areas of planning, budgeting, personnel management, and purchasing.²⁰

FWC has a four-tier system for penalties and violations, civil penalties for noncriminal infractions, criminal penalties, and suspension and forfeiture of licenses and permits. Level One violations are considered the least serious while Level Four violations the most serious.²¹

Level Two Violations

Examples of a Level Two violation include:

- Violating rules or orders of the commission relating to seasons or time periods for the taking of wildlife, freshwater fish, or saltwater fish;
- Violating rules or orders of the commission relating to restricted hunting areas, critical wildlife areas, or bird sanctuaries;
- Violating rules or orders of the commission relating to tagging requirements for wildlife and fur-bearing animals;
- Violating rules or orders of the commission relating to the use of dogs for the taking of wildlife;
- Violating rules or orders of the commission which are not otherwise classified; and
- Violating rules or orders of the commission prohibiting the unlawful use of traps, unless otherwise provided by law.²²

¹⁹ FWC, *FWC votes to postpone bear hunting in 2016* (Jun. 22, 2016), available at https://myfwc.com/media/16632/fwc-votes-to-postpone-bear-hunting-in-2016_062216.pdf.

²⁰ FLA. CONST. art. IV, s. 9.

²¹ Section 379.401, F.S.

²² Section 379.401(2)(a), F.S.

The penalties for Level Two violations are as follows:

Level Two Violation	Type of Infraction	Civil Penalty or Jail Time	License Restrictions
First offense	2 nd Degree Misdemeanor ²³	Max: \$500 or Max: 60 days	None
Second offense within three years of previous Level Two violation (or higher)	1 st Degree Misdemeanor ²⁴	Min: \$250; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	None
Third offense within five years of two previous Level Two violations (or higher)	1 st Degree Misdemeanor ²⁵	Min: \$500; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	Suspension of license for one year
Fourth offense within 10 years of three previous Level Two violations (or higher)	1 st Degree Misdemeanor ²⁶	Min: \$750; Max \$1,000 or Max: one year	Suspension of license for three years

The taking of a bear during closed season is considered a Level Two violation.²⁷

Level Three Violations

Examples of a Level Three violation include:

- The illegal sale or possession of alligators;
- The taking of game, freshwater fish, or saltwater fish while a required license is suspended or revoked;
- The illegal taking and possession of deer and wild turkey.²⁸

The penalties for a Level Three violation are as follows:

Level Three Violation	Type of Infraction	Civil Penalty or Jail Time	License Restrictions
First offense	1 st Degree Misdemeanor ²⁹	Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	None
Second offense within 10 years of a previous Level Three violation (or higher)	1 st Degree Misdemeanor ³⁰	Min: \$750; Max: \$1,000 Max: one year	Suspension of license or permit for up to three years
Fishing, hunting, or trapping on a suspended or revoked license, s. 379.354(17), F.S.	1 st Degree Misdemeanor	Mandatory \$1,000 ³¹ Max: one year	May not acquire license or permit for five years

²³ Section 379.401(2)(b)1., F.S.

²⁴ Section 379.401(2)(b)2., F.S.

²⁵ Section 379.401(2)(b)3., F.S.

²⁶ Section 379.401(2)(b)4., F.S.

²⁷ Section 379.401(2)(a)1., F.S.; Fla. Admin. Code R. 68A-4.009.

²⁸ Section 379.401(3), F.S.

²⁹ Section 379.401(3)(b)1., F.S.

³⁰ Section 379.401(3)(b)2., F.S.

³¹ Section 379.401(3)(b)3., F.S.

Level Four Violations

Examples of a Level Four violation include:

- The making, forging, counterfeiting, or reproduction of a recreational license or the possession of same without authorization from the commission;
- The sale of illegally-taken deer or wild turkey;
- The unlawful killing, injuring, possessing, or capturing of alligators or other crocodilia or their eggs;
- The intentional killing or wounding of any species designated as endangered, threatened, or of special concern; and
- The killing of any Florida or wild panther.³²

The penalties for Level Four Violations are as follows:

Level Four Violation	Type of Infraction	Civil Penalty or Jail Time	License Restrictions
First offense ³³	3 rd Degree Felony	Max: \$5,000 Max: Five Years	None

III. Effect of Proposed Changes:

Section 1 adds the prohibited taking and possession of bears to the list of Level Three violations and the prohibited sale of an illegally-taken bear to the list of Level Four violations.

Section 2 of the bill creates s. 379.4041, F.S., which increases the penalty for taking or possessing a freshly killed bear during the closed season. Under the bill, a person who commits such offenses commits a Level Three violation (a first-degree misdemeanor for the first offense) and forfeits any other FWC license or permit for three years from the violation date. A person who commits a subsequent offense of taking a bear or possessing a freshly killed bear is permanently ineligible for issuance of any FWC license or permit.

The bill also states that any person who possesses for sale or sells a bear taken during the closed season commits a Level Four violation (a third-degree felony).

Section 3 of the bill provides an effective date of July 1, 2020.

IV. Constitutional Issues:

A. Municipality/County Mandates Restrictions:

None.

³² Section 379.401(4)(a), F.S.

³³ Section 379.401(4)(b), F.S.

B. Public Records/Open Meetings Issues:

None.

C. Trust Funds Restrictions:

None.

D. State Tax or Fee Increases:

None.

E. Other Constitutional Issues:

None.

V. Fiscal Impact Statement:**A. Tax/Fee Issues:**

None.

B. Private Sector Impact:

None.

C. Government Sector Impact:

There may be a positive fiscal impact to the state from any fines collected from additional penalties from violations. However, this could be offset by a loss in permit fees from violators who are no longer able to be issued a license.

VI. Technical Deficiencies:

None.

VII. Related Issues:

None.

VIII. Statutes Affected:

This bill creates section 379.4041 of the Florida Statutes.

This bill amends section 379.401 of the Florida Statutes.

IX. Additional Information:

- A. **Committee Substitute – Statement of Substantial Changes:**
(Summarizing differences between the Committee Substitute and the prior version of the bill.)

CS by Environment and Natural Resources Committee on February 3, 2020:

Changes the bill to add the prohibited taking and possession of bears to the list of Level Three violations and the prohibited sale of an illegally-taken bear to the list of Level Four violations.

- B. **Amendments:**

None.

This Senate Bill Analysis does not reflect the intent or official position of the bill's introducer or the Florida Senate.
