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Trash bins 1, hungry bears 0

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DUPUYER — The UnBearAble Bins apparently are living up to their name.

Twenty new bear-proof garbage containers placed in recent weeks at homes in and around Dupuyer are helping keep a near-record year for grizzly conflicts from getting any worse.

"We haven't had any reports of garbage problems since they've been put out," Pondera County Commissioner Joe Christiaens said.

Town and country residents in this stretch of the Rocky Mountain Front have put up with the occasional wandering grizzly for decades.

But a late spring freeze this year wiped out the wild berry crop, and the bears coming down Dupuyer Creek got positively pesky.

"We had 'em in town, around the school, the businesses, in the park, everywhere," Christiaens said.

In rural areas, the bears were stripping the siding off grain sheds and pushing in boarded up windows in search of food.

After grizzlies started showing up as early as July at Jones Memorial Park on the northwest edge of Dupuyer, the nonprofit group Defenders of Wildlife stepped in to buy six of the bear-proof bins to replace the old trash barrels.

"But in thinking about the longer term, we knew if bears were displaced from the park there were other places to go in Dupuyer," said Minette Johnson, Northern Rockies regional representative for Defenders of Wildlife, which has a program to compensate ranchers for livestock lost to grizzlies.

The state Fish, Wildlife & Parks Department and Pondera County then helped buy 20 more containers to place at private residences in the area, according to FWP bear biologist Mike Madel of Choteau.

Each of the 95-gallon bins costs about \$170. Defenders paid about 65 percent, the state 25 percent and the county 10 percent.

The bins are the work of UnBearAble Bins Inc. of Bragg Creek, Alberta, west of Calgary.

Bins called effective

Company president Jay Honeyman said Sunday the bins are designed for ranchers and rural residents who can't afford or have no need for the larger metal containers found in Glacier or Yellowstone.

Madel said Friday he has six more of the bins to place, but so far, so good.

"They have been very effective," Madel said.

Dick Dailey of Dupuyer has had one of the containers for about a month. In late July, bears tipped his cans and scattered the garbage. With the new container, he hasn't had any problems.

Dailey, who has lived in Dupuyer for about 14 years, said residents are seeing a lot more bears.

"And this is the first year they have been in my garbage," he said.

County Commissioner Christiaens said he has had grizzlies in his yard before, but nothing like this year.

Earlier this summer, two out-of-state guests at the bed and breakfast that Christiaens' wife, Rita, runs in Dupuyer had a close encounter

"We sent these people from North Carolina for a walk and they came across two grizzlies in the park," Christiaens said.

Madel said the number of conflicts reported between grizzlies and people may be the most on record.

"This certainly stands out in my 20 years," Madel said.

"I have never had a year like this where grizzly bears are breaking into sheds or just walking into sheds for livestock feed and grain," he said.

No food

The trouble started with the freeze that killed the chokecherry and buffalo berry crops, a key food source for bears.

Grizzlies often make an appearance or two on the prairie grasslands. This year, however, grizzlies went even farther out on the flats to croplands around Lake Francis and even near Dutton, Madel said.

"They are really seeking out grain sources," Madel said.

"It's been a really bad year for bears," Defenders of Wildlife's Johnson added. "There is such a lack of natural foods. They are hitting the garbage like never before."

Madel said this season three grizzlies have been removed from the Front. One was captured and euthanized at a lab in Bozeman. The San Francisco Zoo agreed to take the other two grizzlies. Typically, only one grizzly is removed each year, Madel said.

Another three grizzlies have been captured and relocated this season, Madel said.

Early last week Madel set traps at two sites along Dupuyer Creek in an effort to capture grizzlies suspected of breaking into outbuildings and sheds. But at week's end, the bears had not been captured. Depending on whether the bears have been in trouble before, they will be relocated or killed, Madel said.

Wildlife managers have had to kill more than 15 black bears on the Blackfoot Reservation this summer, including at least eight in the St. Mary area. In September, tribal wildlife managers placed 25 new bear-proof garbage containers across the reservation.

Hunters warned

The grizzly bear population is expanding, but there hasn't been a dramatic increase, Madel said. Bears are primarily wandering outside their home ranges in search of food.

"We just have these bears that are fattening up," Madel said. "They are moving up to their dens now, but they are not in as good of shape as they should be."

Madel also said hunters need to be cautious of their surroundings while in the backcountry. Rural residents also are asked to make sure food is not left out in the open and livestock feed is in a secure location.
