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Lone Star Chapter

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July 19, 2015

RE: Lone Star Chapter Sierra Club Comments for Louisiana Black Bear Delisting Proposal  
(Docket Number FWS-R4-ES-2015-0014)

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am submitting these comments regarding the proposed delisting by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of the Louisiana black bear on behalf of the Lone Star Chapter of the Sierra Club. Although the Lone Star Chapter's (LSC) jurisdiction extends over most of Texas and does not encompass Louisiana, the LSC is particularly interested in the recovery of the Louisiana black bear in East Texas – which represents part of its historic range.

The LSC believes that the particulars of any delisting decision and how it is implemented in Louisiana will directly impact the opportunities of the species to ever rise from extirpation in East Texas. Migration from the western parishes of Louisiana into East Texas could be the genesis of a sustainable breeding population west of the Sabine River. The draft monitoring plan states that “range expansion in bordering Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma may increase bear occurrences and activity in East Texas in future years if sufficient habitat is available.”

The USFWS is undoubtedly aware that a similar situation existed on the border between Texas and Mexico at the Rio Grande River. The Mexican black bear subspecies population no longer existed in the United States by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. However, because there was still a sustainable population of the subspecies in northern Mexico and Big Bend National Park provided protected habitat, the Mexican black bear migrated back into Texas across the Rio Grande and established a breeding population.

The LSC would like to state at the outset that the simple fact that the numbers of the Louisiana black bear (LBB) have rebounded in some regions of Louisiana is a validation of the effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act in preventing species from becoming extinct. This is a success story. It is also valid to state that the recovery of the LBB is not equally secure in all regions of Louisiana.

Some regional subpopulations are more secure than others. For that reason, it would be prudent to structure the decision to delist the LBB on the basis of the subpopulations of the LBB rather than implementing a “one size fits all” decision assuming an equal distribution of the metapopulation. The draft monitoring plan equates success to a sustainable metapopulation only.

In particular, the Lower Atchafalaya River Basin (LARB) subpopulation was noted to have a higher mortality of females, be more isolated with respect to likelihood of migration from the

other sub-populations, and more vulnerable to climate change. Certainly, the coastal parishes are subject to more severe weather. The USFWS noted that the population of the LARB subpopulation has increased since listing. However, for the reasons enumerated above by USFWS, there is valid cause for the LARB to remain listed.

It is true that the western parishes of Louisiana were not included in the LBB recovery plan. The westernmost parish that was part of the plan would be St. Landry. The delisting proposal also discussed the appearance of a new breeding subpopulation, the Three Rivers Complex (TRC), in the Red River-Mississippi River area. The TRC subpopulation and another subpopulation in North Central Louisiana are consolidated with the Tensas River (TRB) subpopulation to analyze suitable habitat. Yet the Kisatchie National Forest in western Louisiana would provide suitable habitat for expansion of the combined TRB subpopulations and would consequently provide increased opportunity for expansion into East Texas. The delisting proposal does note the extensive swath of suitable habitat in East Texas, referring to a 2011 study by Kaminski. Although not referenced by USFWS, a 2013 study by Kaminski and a 2014 report by Tim Siegmund further detailed the highest value LBB habitat in southeast and northeast Texas respectively.

The USFWS has acknowledged the opportunity inherent in the East Texas habitat. USFWS can encourage the expansion into the western parishes and into East Texas by not including the TRC and North Central Louisiana subpopulations with the TRB subpopulation if the TRB is delisted. Retaining listing for the TRC and North Louisiana subpopulations would benefit expansion.

### **Draft Delisting Proposal**

There should be a post-delisting monitoring period. This is only reasonable since there are not good mortality figures resulting from accidental mortalities and euthanasia. The number of sustainable kills per year has yet to be determined and it should differentiate for each of the sub-populations. The number of sustainable kills should include the number from ALL causes, including accidental, poaching, and euthanasia. There is insufficient data at this time to set a hunting quota. When hunting quotas are set, it should be the difference between calculated sustainable kills for the individual subpopulation and the kills resulting from accidents, poaching and euthanasia for that subpopulation.

The draft monitoring report includes extensive discussion regarding the genetic mixing of the subpopulations and the corridors by which individuals move (or have difficulty moving) between the subpopulations. The genetic mixing of subpopulations is determined to be valuable. In fact, the TRC subpopulation was established with human intervention to facilitate communication between subpopulations. Yet the determination of success is still based upon an aggregate metapopulation, even though subpopulation data will be tracking. Given the USFWS understanding of the importance of sustainable subpopulations and population genetics, it is not reasonable to determine success on the metapopulation. It should be based upon subpopulation data.

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It is noted that certain road crossings are the source of mortality. If wildlife highway underpasses or overpasses were installed at Interstate 20 and U.S. Hwy. 90, this could mitigate road mortalities. As part of the monitoring plan, data should be collected from the areas of known accidental road mortality so that comparisons can be made to date collected after any mitigating structures are installed. Since the installation of wildlife crossings is not yet standard procedure and meets resistance due to unfamiliarity and expense, it would be useful to have data to present showing the efficacy of such structures.

The Lone Star Chapter is enthusiastic about the tremendous progress that has been made in the Louisiana black bear's recovery and appreciates this opportunity to comment on the delisting proposal. Our general concern is that the delisting process be tempered by the vulnerabilities of the subpopulations and the opportunity for the subspecies to expand more fully into its historic range.

If you wish to contact me, I can be reached at [elmerz@hal-pc.org](mailto:elmerz@hal-pc.org) or 713-644-8228

Sincerely,

Evelyn L. Merz  
Conservation Chair  
Lone Star Chapter Sierra Club