

Bear Smart FAQs

Black bears are in the Missoula area, but do we also have grizzly bears in Missoula and surrounding communities?

Yes, grizzly bears now live in areas around Missoula and in surrounding communities. Grizzly bears have been documented in Butler Creek, Grant Creek, and the Rattlesnake as well as in the Potomac Valley, Clinton, the Bitterroot, East Missoula, and the Sapphire Mountains. Grizzly bears have walked through the lower Rattlesnake in Missoula. The presence of grizzly bears makes our community's efforts to secure attractants from bears even more important. We all live in bear habitat and can take steps to be good stewards of the land, our wildlife, and our way of life. Securing attractants from bears will minimize conflicts between people and bears, improve human safety, bear safety and survival, and reduce property damage.

What is Fish Wildlife and Parks (FWP) doing to address conflict bears?

FWP has a bear management team that responds to reports of human-bear conflicts. These specialists work with residents or owners to secure attractants and, if necessary, capture bears. Depending on a captured bear's history of behavior, it is either relocated or killed.

What is the Missoula Bear Buffer Zone and the Potomac Bear Mitigation Zone? Where are they?

These zones are areas where conflicts between humans and bears occur more frequently. Once proposed changes are approved, bear-resistant garbage containment will be required in these areas to reduce conflicts. The requirements for bear-resistant containers will be phased in geographically over 3 years so haulers have enough time to purchase and distribute bear-resistant containers. Maps showing the zones and the year when bear-resistant containers will be required can currently be found [at Missoula County Voice](#). After approval, maps will be housed on City and County websites.

Why doesn't FWP reduce the bear population so that requiring bear-resistant garbage bins is unnecessary?

Missoula and surrounding communities exist in bear habitat. As more people move into Missoula and surrounding communities, more bears are attracted to human-related items like garbage, bird feeders, gardens, fruit trees, pet foods, and livestock foods. Bears that get into unsecured human attractants can be relocated, but they may return in a week or two. Killing these bears is not a solution. Other bears will simply replace them. People's failure to secure attractants is the cause of human-bear conflicts. We must work together as a community to secure attractants from bears. For safety, hunting is not allowed around neighborhoods. FWP has a hunting season for black bears in the spring and fall with some of the highest harvest occurring in and around the Missoula and Potomac valleys, but this has not reduced human-bear conflicts. Hunting

bears will not reduce human-bear conflicts¹ unless hunting is so intense and continuous that it eliminates most bears.

What's the difference between renting a bin from a waste hauler and buying your own?

Any bear-resistant container must be approved by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) and must be compatible with your waste hauler's equipment. Currently, you can rent bear-resistant garbage containers from either of Missoula's hauling companies for an estimated \$5 to \$10 per month (as of Fall 2023). This includes repairs and replacements that may be necessary due to wear and tear. If you purchase your own IGBC-certified, hauler-approved container, however, you will have to replace or repair that container at your own expense.

I have a bear-resistant container so I can just leave it out and fill it to the brim, right?

No. To be bear-resistant, the container must be used correctly. The lid must close and latch. Containers must not be overfilled, preventing lids from closing. If possible, put the container out the day of pick-up and return it to a secure location soon after pickup. This can prevent bears from trying to access it, and it may last longer.

Can I use a bear-resistant enclosure to secure garbage rather than a bear-resistant garbage can?

For some neighborhoods and landowners, a bear-resistant enclosure for multiple containers may be an alternative solution. For this, contact Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 2 bear management team for discussion at 406-542-5500

Will I have to call to get a bear-resistant container?

Once the new regulations go into effect, waste haulers will have to place bear-resistant containers at each home in the bear zones as areas are phased in unless the homeowner has purchased a qualifying bear resistant container or a bear-resistant enclosure that is approved by the hauler and FWP is put in place. If you plan to purchase your own container, please call the hauler to make sure the container is compatible with their equipment and IGBC-certified. Currently, haulers in the Missoula area are Republic Services at 406-543-3157 and Grizzly Disposal at 406-541-7171.

What sizes of bear-resistant containers are being provided?

Both Republic Services and Grizzly Disposal have stated that they will be able to provide the standard 95-gallon bear-resistant containers and the smaller 65-gallon bear-resistant containers.

¹Obbard, M. E., E. Howe, L. L. Wall, B. Allison, R. Black, P. Davis, L. Dix-Gibson, M. Gatt and M. N. Hall. 2014. "Relationships among food availability, harvest, and human-bear conflict at landscape scales in Ontario, Canada." *Ursus* 25:98-110. <https://doi.org/10.2192/URSUS-D-13-00018.1>

Northrup, J. M., E. Howe, J. Inglis, E. Newton, M. E. Obbard, B. Pond, and D. Potter. 2023. "Experimental test of the efficacy of hunting for controlling human-wildlife conflicts." *Journal of Wildlife Management* <https://doi.org/10.1002/jwmg.22363>

Where are we in the process to adopt an ordinance requiring bear-resistant bins?

The new regulations have been approved by the Missoula Public Health Board after two public hearings and two comment periods. Next, the approved public health code must be approved by the City Council and Board of County Commissioners.

What if my rental property owner does not comply?

The public health code requires that all rental properties have commercial garbage service in the property owner's name. Property owners will be required to comply with this regulation. Complaints can be directed to Missoula Public Health Department (envhealth@missoulacounty.us or 406-258-4755 or online).

Must businesses comply with the new bear-resistant garbage ordinance?

Once regulations are approved, businesses within the bear zones must provide bear-resistant garbage containers or create a management plan with FWP that prevents bears from accessing their garbage and is compatible with their waste hauler's equipment.

What is the University of Montana doing to secure attractants?

The University of Montana is currently working to implement a management plan to reduce human-bear conflicts and secure attractants on campus. This plan must comply with the regulations. Bear Smart Missoula Working Group members are coordinating with the university.

What can I do if someone in my area is not complying?

Encourage neighbors to secure attractants. If that doesn't work, direct complaints to the Missoula City-County Health Department at envhealth@missoulacounty.us or 406-258-4755 or online. You can also report bear sightings and available attractants at <https://missoulabears.org/report/>. Reports can be anonymous.

What is the City/County doing to address the issue of bears finding attractants at homeless camps?

The City of Missoula regularly performs cleanups of encampments that pose health or safety concerns, including accumulations of garbage and human waste. You can report problems using the City's online reporting form or by leaving a message at (406) 552-6006. Visit <https://www.ci.missoula.mt.us/3186/Urban-Camping> for complete information.

How will the ordinance be enforced?

Missoula Public Health is responsible for enforcement. Enforcement includes a range of actions, from notifying someone of a violation and working with them to come into compliance to more formal Notices of Violation (NOV) and fines. Violations of the health code carry a potential fine of \$200 per violation per day.

Is there financial assistance for low-income families for the added cost of bear-resistant containers?

We recognize that the additional cost of bear-resistant garbage containers is a concern. We are looking into resources that may help meet this need.

Will a garbage ordinance solve all bear conflicts?

No. Garbage is responsible for about half of the human-bear conflicts in our communities, so the new regulations should help significantly. But there are many other sources of human-bear conflicts, including bird feeders, gardens, fruit trees, pet foods, and livestock foods. In addition, if you have a compost pick-up service, we recommend using a bear-resistant container which some companies that pick-up compost provide or at a minimum, put compost out only on the day of pickup. Food compost is highly attractive to bears. Recycling should be rinsed before placing in recycling bins. Reducing human-bear conflicts will require community awareness and work to secure each of these attractants from bears. The [*Missoula Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan*](#) details reasonable solutions for securing attractants. The Bear Smart Missoula Working Group will work with City and County officials to help build awareness of issues and solutions. In addition, with new residents moving into the Missoula area, the working group plans ongoing outreach and education about why and how to secure attractants from bears.

What is the Bear Smart Missoula Working Group?

The [Bear Smart Missoula Working Group](#) includes citizens, bear managers, non-profit organizations, and City and County employees who want to reduce human-bear conflicts in the Missoula area and surrounding communities. The working group's goal is to minimize conflicts by working with the community to secure attractants from bears. This group has developed a [Missoula Area Bear Hazard Assessment](#) and a [Missoula Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan](#).