The Louisiana Forestry Association is opposing the listing of the Louisiana black bear under the Endangered Species Act, but says it wants to help the state's black bear population.

A hearing on whether the Louisiana bear should receive the protection of the federal act, as has been recommended by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is scheduled for Oct. 11 in Baton Rouge.

The timber industry has unwarranted fears that protection of the black bear will affect logging operations, according to some conservationists.

"Traditionally, the private landowner is very suspicious of federal involvement in his activities," says C.A. Vandersteen, executive director of the Louisiana Forestry Association, in a letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service has not allayed the fears of private landowners," he continues. "Their fears manifest themselves in unnecessary and unwarranted regulations and the loss of managing one's property."
In reality, protection of the bear under the Endangered Species Act could have some impact on federally owned land and on land where a federally funded project is to be undertaken, but should have little if any impact on timber operations or most uses of private land, says Randy Lanctot of the Louisiana Wildlife Federation, which is supporting the listing.

"We have a unique bear species, and we should protect it," he says.

The U.S. Wildlife Service said available evidence indicates the Louisiana bear is a distinct subspecies of the American black bear family and there are only a few such bears remaining.

The Louisiana black bear, which also roamed through parts of Mississippi, Arkansas and Texas, is the animal species written about by William Faulkner in his novel, "The Bear," and is the source of the Teddy Bear, because Teddy Roosevelt refused to shoot a young bear that had been snared by members of his hunting party.

The Forestry Association questions the genetic purity of the Louisiana bear, because of an attempted introduction of black bears from Minnesota into Louisiana in the 1960s.

It also says there is no good data on bear population in Louisiana on which to say the bear is endangered.

But the association says it has "initiated a Black Bear Recovery Team, comprised of private landowners, wildlife biologists, industry, state and federal agencies and conservation groups."

"The Louisiana Forestry Association strongly encourages the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to delay its proposed listing of the black bear until regional efforts have a chance to run their course," Vandersteen says in his letter. "We believe the recovery team's recommendations will expand bear populations and involve private landowners to a greater extent than would occur if the federal government mandated such protection through its regulatory powers."

An endangered species can be recovered "without invoking a law if everybody is cooperative," but "some of us would like to see something beyond a promise of good will," Lanctot says.

"You can fly the state and see the 'good will' of some forest managers, who don't even practice good forest management," the wildlife representative says. "Some people get caught up in business and forget other values that are important to the rest of us."

One reason that timber interests nationwide are fighting inclusion of animals in the endangered species list is that "timber interests are losing their grip on national forests and they don't like it," Lanctot says. "But that land is your land and my land and is not land for a timber sale."

Managed properly, such lands can play a key role in maintaining wildlife. The black bear is at the top of the wildlife pyramid in Louisiana, Lanctot says.

As top predator in Louisiana forests, the black bear's demise "is a good indicator that the future of wildlife habitat is going downhill," says Dr. Michael Caire of the Sierra Club. "If we don't have a good place for bears, then we have a damaged habitat.

"If we're not managing our wildlife refuges for bears in Louisiana, then we are not managing them to the best of our ability," he says.

Caire believes there should be both an effort at protecting existing bears and at restoring their habitat where possible.

One important part of habitat protection is creating wooded corridors, preferably along streams or drainage areas, that connect wildlife refuges, Caire says. That could be done by purchasing easements from willing landowners.

Such corridors are important because they allow for gene flow between isolated bear populations, says Murray Lloyd, head of the Forest Association's Wildlife and Recreation Committee.

Black bears travel enough to use such corridors, but are reclusive enough not to harm anyone.

There should be some reserves, buffer zones and connecting corridors for the bears, he says. Landowners who allow their land to be used for such purposes need to be compensated.

The costs of creating and maintaining corridors between major habitat areas could be relatively small because it really only takes "a few thousand acres of conservation easements," Caire says. Such corridors would be good not only for bears, but for other wildlife as well.

There is also the potential for restoring some habitat using farm properties repossessed by the federal government, Lanctot says. After all, clearing for agricultural land has had the biggest impact on habitat for bears and other wildlife.

The hearing on whether the bear should be listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act will be at 7 p.m. Oct. 11 in the Louisiana Room of the Wildlife and Fisheries building on Quail Drive.