Politics complicates lives of Louisiana black bears

By BOB ANDERSON
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Once common in the state’s woods, the number of Louisiana black bears has dwindled to a precious few.

When studies indicated several years ago that there may be fewer than 300 members of the subspecies remaining, some conservationists petitioned to protect the animals under the Endangered Species Act.

Other conservationists, landowners, timber companies and researchers formed a committee to try and find ways to save Louisiana’s bears.

Both groups had a measure of success.

The Black Bear Conservation Committee members overcame their divergent concerns and came up with a manual to help landowners manage their property in ways that won’t ruin the bear’s habitat.

The group also embarked on a public education campaign about black bears and has put together a plan for recovering the bear.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared the Louisiana black bear a threatened species, providing severe penalties for harming the bears.

As a required follow up to the listing, the service also proposed an area of critical habitat for the threatened animal.

Release of that proposal earlier this year brought a political backlash.

The proposed critical habitat cuts through the middle of the state from Arkansas to the Gulf, drawing concern from landowners about how it might affect their rights to use their property.

The potential impacts of such a designation are minimal and are currently read, the federal government might decide to change the rules in the future.

They complain that even if the Wildlife Service says farm land would not be affected, it is included on the maps of the proposed area of critical habitat.

The issue was further complicated as national groups, dedicated to either strengthening or weakening the Endangered Species Act, began to draw battle lines in Louisiana.

Both groups accused the other of disseminating misinformation and trying to win support for their national agendas.

Public hearings, filled with angry landowners, have ensued and those concerned with the preservation of the bear have expressed fear that the widespread feelings of good will that the bear once enjoyed are withering under debates over property rights.

Some researchers and governmental officials close to the issue say it is much ado about nothing, because the federal government already must consider endangered species when it considers federal permits and projects.

The Black Bear Conservation Committee has remained neutral on the critical habitat issue, saying it is concentrating on correcting misinformation about restrictions on farming, hunting, mineral development and timber harvest that would be placed on areas designated by the Wildlife Service as critical habitat.

A big part of what members of that group say they have to deal with is a distrust of the federal government. What they fear will be lost in the process are the needs of the Louisiana bear and a spirit of cooperation aimed at protecting the bear in ways that aren’t intrusive on private property owners.