

Do taxpayers pay for bear hunt?

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The claim

Nevada's bear hunt program is a money loser for the Nevada Department of Wildlife that is subsidized by general taxpayers.

The background

Here's an excerpt from a letter to the editor published in the Reno Gazette-Journal by Fred Voltz of Carson City:

“Nevada’s Department of Wildlife ... collected \$55,000 of hunt fees over two years but spent \$200,000 in the first year. An open-records request to NDOW for second-year hunt expenses indicates ‘no records are kept tracking costs of operating and administering the bear hunt.’ ...

“To kill 25 bears, Nevadans subsidized each dead bear at \$8,000. ... When will NDOW represent all state residents rather than subsidizing wildlife death by a relative few?”

While he said he doesn’t know the bear hunt’s specific costs, NDOW spokesman Chris Healy agrees its fees don’t cover its costs.

“Mr. Voltz seems to think if it doesn’t turn a profit, it’s not a legitimate activity but we’re not looking at a profit motive,” he said. “Our bighorn sheep program is one of our most successful restorations — is he saying we shouldn’t do it because it also doesn’t turn a profit?”

NDOW has been mandated to establish a bear hunt, not to make money, he said. Some hunts bring in more than they cost — such as the mule deer hunt — while others don’t.

“We’re not expected to turn a profit, just that we stay within our overall game budget,” Healy said.

Let’s make clear why the cost matters. Those opposing the hunt seem to be looking for a talking point aimed at people without strong feelings on the issue. If the general public’s tax dollars are going to help a few hunters kill bears — rather than the hunters themselves paying for the full cost of the privilege — then perhaps more people can be convinced to call for stopping it.

But even though it’s agreed the hunt incurs costs higher than its hunters pay, that still leaves us with needing to determine who pays for that extra cost. If it’s sportspersons — meaning hunters and anglers, in the gender-neutral term used by government — then those opposing the hunt haven’t created a wedge.

If it’s taxpayers in general, then that could help the cause.

NDOW’s game management division cost \$4.4 million in fiscal year 2012.

Almost \$1 million of that comes from Nevada hunting and fishing fees (plus some boating fees), and the rest comes from federal grants, mostly from what’s called Pittman-Robertson. That last thing is an act passed by Congress in 1937 to create a tax to fund efforts to bring back species of wildlife near extinction. (Pittman was Nevada’s Democratic Sen. Key Pittman.)

Those Pittman-Robertson funds — making up the bulk of federal grant money obtained by NDOW — come from taxes on guns, ammunition, and archery equipment and supplies.

NDOW's deputy director and chief financial officer Patrick Cates said the “the opposite is true” regarding general taxpayers footing the difference between hunt fees and its actual cost.

He said the bear hunt is “paid 100 percent by sportsmen through both federal grants and state fees.”

The No Bear Hunt NV people shared documentation on this discussion. Included was a 2000 research paper by Dean Lueck, a professor of Agriculture & Resource Economics at the University of Arizona. It backs the other side.

Lueck wrote, “The funding for these (wildlife) agencies still comes mostly from hunters and anglers, either directly through licenses or indirectly through taxes on equipment.”

Voltz isn't buying it: “Forty-eight percent of (NDOW's) budget comes from the federal government. Part of that 48 percent is Pittman-Robertson revenue from various excise taxes collected on ammunition, among other items, most of which comes from non-hunters who own guns. Non-hunter gun owners dwarf hunter gun owners across the country, not just in Nevada.”

In fact, it's possible Lueck was right in 2000 and Voltz is now right.

According to a Pew Research Center survey conducted in February, the amount of gun owners who say they own a gun for hunting fell from 49 percent in 1999 to 32 percent this year.

Meanwhile, gun owners who say they have a gun for protection jumped over that same time from 26 percent to 48 percent.

According to the latest figures from the National Rifle Association, there are 70 to 80 million gun owners in the United States. According to the latest from the U.S. Census, there are 13.7 million hunters.

If the NRA is accurate, that seems to mean 1 in 5 gun owners also hunts. It's hard to get exact numbers because no one tracks gun owners who don't hunt.

And that Pew survey could be misinterpreted because people might also hunt even though they told researchers that their main reason for a gun was protection.

Deep in the full report, Pew followed up to learn people's top two reasons for owning a gun. Even then, hunting was picked by just two out of five people overall, meaning that for all intents, 60 percent of gun owners don't hunt. (Or 80 percent don't hunt if the NRA's gun-owner number is right.)

In other words, taxes from millions of nonhunting gun owners pay for various state hunting programs such as Nevada's bear hunt.

The verdict

There are two factual claims under consideration.

The first is true: Nevada's bear hunt is a money loser as far as the hunter's fees paying for the government's administration of the hunt.

(A case can be made for added benefit to the state from the 101 people who came from out of state to hunt bears.)

The second — and bigger — claim is not as simple. The majority of NDOW's funds come from sportspersons when one considers half of the total comes from state hunting and fishing fees and then there's the large chunk of federal fees paid by those who hunt and fish.

Even if Voltz is right that the majority (maybe just a small majority) of NDOW's federal grant money comes from nonhunters, the tax money still isn't coming from the general population but from gun, archery and fishing enthusiasts.

For Voltz to truly make his case, he'd have to show that nonhunting gun owners, anglers and archers generally oppose hunting or don't want their taxes to support wildlife agencies that oversee hunts. Fact Checker could find no evidence of this and some that indicates the opposite.

For example, a 2011 survey commissioned by the National Shooting Sports Foundation and conducted by the independent research firm Responsive Management found 94 percent of Americans — not just gun owners — agree with the statement that it's "OK for other people to hunt if they do so legally and in accordance with hunting laws and regulations."

Truth Meter: 4 (out of 10)

Photo above: An orphaned black bear is released by the Nevada Department of Wildlife into the Carson Range of the Sierra Nevada in 2008. (RGJ file photo)

