

## **\*\* Understanding Landowner Decisions to Secure Bear Attractants in the Bitterroot Valley**

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Human–bear conflict remains a challenge in western Montana, with many conflicts driven by unsecured anthropogenic attractants. While attractant securement is widely promoted as an effective mitigation strategy, less is known about how landowners decide whether and when to adopt these practices. This study examines how reference groups and risk perception influence landowners’ decisions to secure bear attractants in the Bitterroot Valley. We conducted semi-structured interviews with private landowners in the Bitterroot Valley. Interviews examined perceptions of bear presence and risk, social influences on management decisions, and experiences with wildlife. Interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in decision-making related to attractant securement. Emerging findings suggest that perceived risk is strongly influenced by direct experience with bears, particularly knowledge of bear presence on one’s property. Landowners who had observed bears or evidence of bear activity frequently described increased concern and greater motivation to secure attractants. Reference groups were largely interpersonal and local, with neighbors and close social contacts serving as primary sources of information and behavioral cues. These social interactions influenced how participants assessed risk and evaluated which attractant management behaviors were necessary or socially appropriate. These preliminary results underscore the importance of accounting for lived experience and local social networks in human-bear conflict mitigation efforts. Management strategies that engage trusted community members and acknowledge experiential knowledge may improve adoption of attractant securement practices.