



For Immediate Release: August 15, 2025

Contact: Dr. Francisco J. Santiago-Ávila
Washington Wildlife First Science and Advocacy Director
fran@wawildlifefirst.org
(608) 285-2738

Washington Wildlife First Calls for Removal of State Wildlife Department Director

Director Kelly Susewind has joined an out-of-state trophy hunting and gun rights group in seeking ouster of all state wildlife commissioners who voted to eliminate spring bear hunting.

Bellingham, WA – Washington Wildlife First Science and Advocacy Director Dr. Francisco J. Santiago-Ávila [issued a call earlier today](#) for the removal of Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Kelly Susewind, following a report that Susewind is working alongside an extremist out-of-state gun rights organization to oust four wildlife commissioners who resisted his push to reinstate spring bear hunting.

Yesterday, [Columbia Insight](#) published a [letter](#) Susewind sent to Governor Bob Ferguson, urging an investigation into Commissioners John Lehmkuhl, Barbara Baker, Lorna Smith, and Melanie Rowland. Susewind’s letter implicitly referenced and parroted the language of a May [petition](#) by the U.S. Sportsmen’s Alliance, an Ohio-based organization that lobbies and litigates nationwide to advance trophy hunting and oppose gun control.

“Director Susewind has long made clear that he prioritizes the interests of trophy hunters above his responsibility to protect Washington’s wildlife and his duty to represent the interests and values of Washingtonians,” said Washington Wildlife First Science and Advocacy Director Dr. Francisco J. Santiago-Ávila. “We are surprised only that he is willing to be so overt in working with a trophy hunting group to eliminate all the commissioners who challenge his iron grip on Washington’s wildlife policy.”

After the Columbia Insight article posted, Governor Ferguson’s office released a statement indicating that “the governor takes concerns from an agency director very seriously,” and has thus directed Washington State Human Resources to conduct an investigation in response to the letter.

“We understand why the governor believes he needs to pursue an investigation,” Santiago-Ávila said. “However, we hope he will not limit his investigation to the commissioners targeted by the trophy hunting lobby, but will expand it to include the entire commission and, especially, Director Susewind.”

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission approves state rules regulating fish and wildlife, sets statewide fish and wildlife policy, and is the only entity with supervisory authority over Susewind. In turn, Susewind directs the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), a state agency with roughly 2,000 employees and a capital and operating budget of more than \$1 billion, whose primary [mandate](#) is to “preserve, protect, perpetuate, and manage” state fish and wildlife.

The Commission overrode Susewind’s objections to suspend the spring bear hunt in 2021, after which [Susewind promised hunters](#) that his agency would “put a lot of energy” into reviving the hunt. The following November, however, the Commission once again resisted pressure from Susewind and [approved a policy banning](#) recreational spring bear hunting.

Before the ban, Washington was one of only nine states that still allowed spring bear hunting, which orphans newborn cubs and targets bears just as they emerge from hibernation, when they are at their most vulnerable. A [2022 poll](#) found that 80% of the Washington public oppose spring bear hunting, while only 6% support the practice.

Susewind [has admitted](#) that his passion for hunting shapes every decision he makes as director and spoken publicly about his particular fondness for killing bears. During the 2022 debate, Susewind made an emotional plea to the Commission to preserve his “experience” of killing bears during springtime, protesting that it was unfair to expect him to wait until August when the fall bear hunting season begins.

“Spring hunting is very different: it’s limited, there are less people out there, it’s a different time of year, it’s a different approach ... I can tell you from personal experience, my first game animal was a spring bear 51 years ago, that it is a very different experience,” [Susewind said](#) before the vote on November 18, 2022. “Don’t say my opportunity [to kill bears] in the fall replaces my opportunity in the spring. It does not. ... Don’t tell me that it is the same thing, and that if I kill a bear in the fall it is the same as if I kill a bear in the spring. It’s just not.”

Washington bans spring hunting of nearly all species to allow wildlife the opportunity to recover from winter and raise their young. For many years, however, Susewind justified spring bear hunting as an exception necessary for “management” purposes. He was forced to abandon that pretext in 2021 when commissioners and wildlife advocates exposed the lack of evidence for this claim.

Earlier this year, [Ferguson revoked](#) former Governor Jay Inslee’s reappointment of Dr. Tim Ragen, one of the commissioners who supported the ban, following a campaign by the Sportsmen’s Alliance and its allies. A month after Ferguson appointed three hunters to the commission, the Sportsmen’s Alliance submitted its [petition](#) to remove the four remaining commissioners who supported the ban.

“It is no coincidence that Susewind and the Sportsmen’s Alliance are seeking to remove the only three members of the commission who are not hunters, and three of the four women on the commission,” Santiago-Ávila said. “The commission is supposed to represent all Washingtonians, including the 97% who do not hunt, but Susewind and the Sportsmen’s Alliance want to eliminate anyone who does not share their view of wildlife primarily as trophies to be ‘bagged.’”

The Sportsmen’s Alliance submitted 35 documents obtained through its public disclosure request as support for its petition and a [supplemental petition](#), many in heavily redacted form. Washington Wildlife First obtained unredacted copies of those documents through its own public records request and found that they not only fail to support the inflammatory claims, but, in many cases, show the allegations to be false, misleading, or disingenuously selective.

“These allegations are designed to defame commissioners, inflame passions, and incite retaliation,” said Santiago-Ávila. “Although we have long had serious concerns about Director Susewind’s leadership, it is shocking that as a public servant he would amplify such a reckless smear campaign.”

For example, the Sportsmen’s Alliance claims Commission Chair Barbara Baker deleted documents in violation of the Public Records Act (PRA). However, [in a court filing](#) in response to a lawsuit the Sportsmen brought for alleged PRA violations, WDFW points out that the documents used to support

this claim actually demonstrate its falsehood, because they are records that Baker preserved and produced. Meanwhile, the unredacted version of one document reveals that trophy hunting advocate Commissioner Molly Linville agreed to delete records, a fact the petition does not mention.

Santiago-Ávila said Washington Wildlife First has its own concerns over WDFW's lack of compliance with the PRA, with multiple open records requests going back more than three years.

“This is a department-wide issue, not a problem centered around specific commissioners,” he said. “Under Susewind’s leadership, WDFW has consistently failed to respond to records requests in a good-faith, timely manner, with a pattern of withholding sensitive documents for as long as it can.”

Santiago-Ávila said this is just the tip of the iceberg, pointing to a [2020 appeals court decision](#) striking down Susewind’s illegal program allowing bear hunting with bait and hounds in violation of a 1995 voter initiative; numerous lawsuits for violations of the [State Environmental Policy Act](#) and the [U.S. Endangered Species Act](#); and findings by the Department of Labor and Industries that Susewind’s team willfully [committed serious violations](#) of workplace safety laws that led to the tragic deaths of two wildlife biologists in 2023 and 2024 and a serious accident in 2024.

“Director Susewind has consistently shown contempt for the law, disregard for the welfare of his employees, disrespect for the commission that supervises him, and indifference to the plight of the wildlife he is charged with protecting,” he said. “He is the cancer at the heart of this dysfunctional agency, and it is long past time for him to go.”

###