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Governor signs bill that increases fines on poachers and MDC increases penalty points.

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MDC and State of Missouri increase penalties for poaching

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The Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and the Missouri legislature and governor have taken actions to increase penalties for those caught poaching Missouri game animals and other native wildlife species.

Missouri Governor Michael Parson signed HB260 into law July 11. Called the Poaching Bill, it significantly raises fines for those convicted of illegally taking Missouri game species and other native wildlife. HB260 was sponsored by Representative Jered Taylor (Republic) and Senator Mike Bernskoetter (Jefferson City).

New fine amounts include \$10,000-\$15,000 for each elk or black bear killed illegally, \$1,000-\$5,000 for each whitetailed buck, \$500-\$1,000 for each wild turkey, and \$500-\$1,000 for each paddlefish.

The fines are considered restitution payments for poaching game animals and are ordered by a judge. Monies from the fines go to the state's school moneys fund. The restitution payments are in addition to other fines and penalties for violating the Wildlife Code of

Missouri. The new fines will go into effect Aug. 28.

Supporters of the bill said that previous fines for poaching were too low in Missouri. The bill also gained support in part from five Missouri elk that were illegally killed by poachers in the past few years. None of the cases has yet been solved.

Earlier this year, MDC and the Missouri Conservation Commission increased the penalty points they give to individuals convicted of violating the Wildlife Code of Missouri for illegal activities, including poaching.

According to MDC records, 547 wild turkeys, 58 paddlefish, and 4,731 deer were illegally taken, or poached, in 2017 and 2018. MDC is also investigating the poaching of five elk over the past several years. Black bear poaching incidents are a growing concern as well.

“In addition to doing what we can by increasing penalty points for Wildlife Code violations, conservation agents are also working with county prosecutors and judges to help reduce incidents of poaching and other violations by increasing penalties such as fines and jail time,” said MDC Protection Division Chief Randy Doman.

Doman explained how penalties are determined.

“The state legislature has the authority to establish penalty classifications related to poaching and other wildlife violations,” Doman said. “MDC and the Missouri Conservation Commission set the regulations of the Wildlife Code of Missouri and conservation agents issue tickets for violations, such as for poaching. Agents then submit those tickets to the appropriate county courts. County prosecutors then determine how to proceed with the violations. If the person is convicted of the violations by the county court, the judge then determines fines, jail time, and/or other penalties. Monies from fines are kept in the county and do not go to MDC.”

Doman added that depending on the violation, MDC staff can then assign persons convicted of Code violations anywhere from zero to 16 points per violation.

“Once a person accumulates 16 points, MDC staff will review the circumstances surrounding the violations and may recommend that the Conservation Commission consider revoking or suspending the person’s permit privileges for up to one year,” Doman explained. “If a person accumulates more than 16 points, the recommendation to the Commission may be for a suspension of more than one year. Staff consider the person’s accumulated points for the past five years in making recommendations to the Commission.”

Examples of recent MDC penalty-point increases are:

Illegal baiting of wildlife from 4 to 8 points,

Buying, selling, having, or releasing prohibited invasive species from 4 to 16 points,

Violations related to paddlefish from 4 to 12 points,

Taking over the legal limit of deer and turkeys from 8 to 12 points,

Doubling points for other violations related to illegal taking of wildlife from 4 to 8 points,
and

Releasing feral hogs into the wild from 0 to 16 points.

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