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TOP STORY

Draft grizzly habitat plan draws few opponents, no allies at Missoula meeting

ROB CHANEY rchaney@missoulian.com Jan 3, 2018 Updated 17 min ago



FILE - In this Sept. 25, 2013 file photo, a grizzly bear cub forages for food a few miles from the north entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Gardiner, Mont.

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Researchers say there are an estimated 718 bears in the region, a figure that's little changed from last year as state officials prepare for possible hunts for the animals for the first time in

decades. (Alan Rogers /The Casper Star-Tribune via AP, File)

The Associated Press

An afternoon listening session on the draft grizzly bear recovery plan brought a few opponents and no supporters to Missoula on Wednesday.

Several scheduled speakers didn't appear due to bad driving conditions on Wednesday. Attendance figures were not available for an evening listening session.

One who did make the trip was East Glacier resident Louis Bruno.

"I'm one of the few people who doesn't live next to grizzly habitat — I live in grizzly habitat," Bruno said. While he's never personally seen one on his property, his remote game cameras regularly captured images of them prowling around.

"We laugh at comments about not letting children out at night or letting them play in the woods," Bruno said. "The last thing a grizzly bear wants to be around is a bunch of screaming kids."

On the other hand, having grizzlies around may have been the only thing that saved the Badger-Two Medicine wedge of national forest that lies between Glacier Park and the Bob Marshall, Bruno said.

When he moved to East Glacier in 1975, the area regularly saw motocross races across its midsection, and energy companies were taking leases to drill there for oil and natural gas. The grizzly joined the Endangered Species list that year. Protecting its habitat, along with concerns by the Blackfeet Indian Reservation about the area's cultural significance were main arguments for limiting development

in the 130,000-acre landscape.

“This is one place where the situation has gotten better for the bear,” Bruno said. “If not for the Endangered Species Act, I have no doubt there’d be oil fields on the Badger-Two Medicine today.”

Delisting the grizzly would lead to state hunting seasons, Bruno argued, and the first bears killed likely would be the ones trying hardest to link the island populations of the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems.

And the draft plan lacks any mechanism to connect those habitats, critic Patricia Ames said. That was just one of the objections she raised.

“It appears hastily put together and greatly lacks any science-based criteria,” Ames said. The plan has no measuring criteria for changes in grizzly food sources, climate shifts, road activity, increasing human populations, agricultural pressures or recreation demands, she added.

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All those things should have baseline observations so grizzly bear managers in the future can track how the habitat supports its bears.

The six-hour workshop sought “ideas and information about characteristics of habitat necessary to support a recovered population of grizzly bears and habitat parameters that can be measured and directly related to grizzly bear population and health.”

Ames, Bruno and three others raised objections to the plan that wildlife managers would use if grizzlies in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem get delisted from Endangered Species Act protection. No one spoke in favor during the Wednesday afternoon portion of the workshop.

When the Lewis and Clark expedition into the Rocky Mountain West first encountered grizzly bears in 1805, an estimated 50,000 bears inhabited the continental United States between the Great Plains and the Pacific Coast. In 1921, biologists recorded 37 separate populations of grizzlies in the Lower 48 states. By 1975, all but six were wiped out.

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke declared the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzlies recovered on June 22. About 700 grizzlies are estimated to inhabit that three-state area surrounding Yellowstone National Park. If the delisting move survives several federal lawsuits, the bears would become the responsibility of wildlife agencies in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming.

Wednesday’s meeting focused on recovery plans for the largest single population of grizzlies: the roughly 1,000 that occupy the Rocky Mountains from Glacier National Park south through the Bob

Marshall Wilderness complex.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grizzly recovery coordinator Hillary Cooley said additional written comments will be accepted through Friday, Jan. 26. Then she will categorize, summarize and respond if necessary to any that affect the draft design.

“The main point of putting this out there is to make sure we didn’t miss anything,” Cooley said. “The listening session is not a poll or a majority rule. It’s a check to see if we used the best available science and did we consider it.”

The final plan could be available this summer, although Cooley said there was no definite deadline.

Additional comments can be submitted through the Federal eRulemaking Portal: [regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov). In the search box, enter the docket number FWS-R6-ES-2017-0057. Then click on the Search button. Comments may be entered by clicking on “Comment Now!”

Comments also can be hand-delivered or mailed to Public Comments Processing, Attn: Docket No. FWS-R6-ES-2017-0057; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, MS: BPHC; 5257 Leesburg Pike; Falls Church, VA 22041-3803.

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