

HUNTING

Grizzly Bear Conservation Groups Challenge Loosening Wolf Hunting Restrictions

The hearing on Nov. 20 will determine when wolf trapping season begins, with potential implications for the grizzly bear population and ongoing delisting efforts in Montana

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A wolf slinks through the grass near the Inside North Fork in Glacier National Park on July 30, 2022. Hunter D'Antuono | Flathead Beacon

Gray wolves have long been a symbol of the complex relationship between humans and nature. While most famous for their evocative howl and spiritual significance across cultures, these large carnivores are also at the center of ongoing debates about balancing keystone species conservation with other human interests, like hunting and livestock protection.

In recent years, the fierce wolf controversy has bled into protection efforts for another iconic Montana carnivore – the grizzly bear.

On Sept. 22, this debate reached its boiling point as the Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizen Task Force and WildEarth Guardians, two conservation groups, filed an injunction to halt the extension of Montana's wolf trapping season to protect the state's recovering grizzly bear population. U.S. District Court Judge Donald Molloy will hear oral arguments for the case on Nov. 20 at 10 a.m.

“Our goal is to make sure that the wildlife management from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is responsible, ethical and sound,” Mike Bader, consultant to the Flathead-Lolo-Bitterroot Citizen Task Force, said. “They’re missing the mark on all three of those, so we’re trying to prevent grizzly bears from being injured and killed. These bears that are immigrating into the Bitterroot and other areas are very valuable, so to lose even one or two would be a big deal.”

The legal action was a direct response to the Fish and Wildlife Commission's decision on Aug. 17 to lengthen the wolf trapping season by over one month. In past years, the season has begun on Dec. 31, but the Commission set the upcoming season to begin on Nov. 27 in most parts of the state. The new regulations also authorize individuals to each trap 10 wolves and hunt 10 others per season.

For the conservation groups, this decision raises alarm bells, as many grizzly bears will not yet be hibernating in their dens, putting them at greater risk of falling victim to wolf traps and snares. In the lawsuit, the plaintiffs draw attention to 21 recent instances of grizzly bears being hurt and maimed by traps, including dismembered toes, feet and forearms.

“Concerning doesn’t even begin to do justice to how most of the public feels about what the Commission has approved,” Lizzy Pennock, carnivore coexistence attorney for WildEarth Guardians, said. “You can only yell into a void for so long and have the managers completely disregard most of the public who come out against the wolf snaring and trapping before you go to court. This year, the Commission on August 17 didn’t make any efforts to try to protect grizzly bears, they went the other way.”

The Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem in Northwest Montana is home to approximately 1,100 grizzly bears protected under the Endangered Species Act, according to Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP). While the bear population has been growing in past decades, they still occupy between 4% and 6% of their historical home range.

FWP has allowed regulated gray wolf hunting, including archery, general hunting, and trapping, since 2011. However, because wolf and grizzly habitats significantly overlap, trapping has long been a controversial practice. The FWP declined to comment on how this pending litigation would affect the upcoming trapping season.

Bader said that the weeks immediately before denning are when grizzly bears feed the most. Nov. 27 aligns perfectly with this time of year, making the potential for harm more imminent, he added.

“That’s right at the end of hunting season and there’s still quite a bit of unretrieved game and gut piles,” Bader said. “So, bears are still out and very active. We have documentation of one bear in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem – a female that had three cubs – that was still out in mid-December. One of the yearling cubs got caught in a trap and that’s really dangerous.”

Bader explains that the goal of the conservation groups’ legal action is twofold. First, they seek to end baiting – the use of fresh meat to lure animals off protected land – and trapping during the season when bears aren’t denning. For them, the wolf trapping season would ideally open on Jan. 1 and extend through February. The groups also want FWP to

reevaluate permitted trapping methods, putting an end to snaring and baiting in occupied grizzly bear habitat.

“Bears from miles away could be attracted to (baits) and they are curious animals, especially cubs and subadults,” Bader said. “Then, of course, snares are very indiscriminate. We’re all for wildlife management and fishing and hunting, but we’re also very supportive of fair chase principles.”

Ultimately, if the court sides with the plaintiffs, then the defendants – the State of Montana, Chair of the Fish and Wildlife Commission Lesley Robinson and Gov. Greg Gianforte – would be responsible for developing a habitat conservation plan for grizzly bears.

Robinson – who did not respond to requests for comment – is also vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association (MSGA), an organization that has [historically](#) been in favor of [managing wolf populations](#) by increasing hunting and trapping opportunities. In a 2022 letter sent to FWP, MSGA expressed frustration about the quantity of wolves in Montana.

“MSGA represents ranching families throughout the state, and we have experienced first-hand the impacts this apex predator has on our family ranches” MSGA President Jim Steinbeisser said.

In the past, Gianforte, a hunter himself, has signed [aggressive legislation](#) surrounding wolf hunting, including calling for the killing of at least 450 wolves in 2021, approximately 40% of Montana’s wolf population. The same year, a panel of Montana wildlife commissioners appointed by Gianforte also approved new hunting and trapping methods, including the use of bait and increasing bag limits to 20 wolves per individual.

Gianforte declined to speak about the ongoing litigation specifically; however, he is a vocal opponent of pre-2021 wolf protection measures, including quotas and wolf management units.

“The Legislature makes laws, the Fish and Wildlife Commission sets rules based on both those laws and science, and FWP implements those rules,” the governor [tweeted](#) in 2022 in response to a court ruling that placed limits on Montana wolf hunting. “Unfortunately, another activist judge overstepped his bounds today to align with extreme activists.”

For Pennock, the most concerning aspect of the Committee’s recent decision is that it would leave dispersing bears – the ones expanding into new areas of Montana – most vulnerable.

“Dispersing bears have an outsized importance to the ability of the bear population as a whole to recover, because we need bears moving between recovery zones and the strong population core into other areas,” Pennock said. “Killing one dispersing female grizzly bear is irreparable harm to the population. Every single bear is so important for achieving recovery.”

In the backdrop of this legal debate is the [ongoing](#) grizzly bear [delisting](#) effort in Montana. Gianforte supports delisting grizzly bears from the Endangered Species Act, which would put species management in the hands of state officials.

“The state is well-prepared to manage this iconic American species,” Gianforte said this past [July](#).

Pennock disagrees, arguing that Montana’s failure to protect grizzly bears from wolf traps while they’re currently supported by the Endangered Species Act is evidence that the state would not adequately protect them without this federal mandate.

“They’re shooting themselves in the foot for delisting efforts by approving this,” Pennock said. “They are bringing harm to the very bears that we need to eventually get to a recovered population.”

The conservation groups said that although hunting can be a divisive issue in Montana, when it comes to the recent decision by the Commission, most of the public is on their side.

“Many wildlife professionals have spoken out about it and people don’t want to see grizzly bears wounded and maimed,” Bader said. “People who are even pretty conservative say these regulations have gone over the line. They’ve gone way too far this time.”

Pennock expects the court to rule on the preliminary injunction before the hunting season starts. However, the ultimate outcome of the lawsuit will take longer.

“We have a vision where it’s so special that Montana can be home to grizzly bears and wolves,” Pennock said. “This commission and this administration show an absolute disdain for their lives and that’s just unacceptable.”