



THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY MONTANA CHAPTER

POSITION STATEMENT OF THE MONTANA CHAPTER OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY: DELISTING GRIZZLY BEARS IN THE YELLOWSTONE ECOSYSTEM

The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society is the professional association for wildlife research and management professionals living and working in Montana. Montana is one of the 3 states in Yellowstone's grizzly bear ecosystem.

The Montana Chapter endorses the proposal by the US Fish and Wildlife Service to remove grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem from the list of species protected under the US Endangered Species Act (ESA) (50 CFR, part 17, Nov. 17, 2005). Since the grizzly bear was listed as "threatened" in 1975 under the ESA, the recovery effort for grizzlies in the Yellowstone area has been a model for how cooperative efforts by state and federal resource management agencies can lead to the recovery of a listed species.

Important components of the successful recovery and delisting program include:

- The development of grizzly bear management guidelines in 1979 (modified in 1986).
- The development by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service of a recovery plan in 1982 (modified in 1993) that identified criteria for defining recovery of the species in a number of designated recovery areas including the Yellowstone Ecosystem.
- The accomplishment of these recovery criteria and associated growth of the grizzly bear population by a cooperative effort over a 30 year period by state and federal resource management agencies under the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) and the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee of the IGBC. These groups were formed in 1983.
- The execution of an adequately-funded cooperative state-federal research effort currently coordinated by the US Geological Survey that has led to the situation where the Yellowstone grizzly bear population is by far the most extensively researched and best understood population of bears anywhere in the world. This research effort has

generated approximately 181 peer-reviewed publications, theses, and annual reports during 1975-2005 culminating in a recent Wildlife Monograph (Schwartz et al. 2005).¹

- The achievement of the demographic targets established in the recovery plan including:
 1. *Abundance targets:* The abundance target (observation of at least 15 different females with newborn cubs) has been exceeded since 1986 (6 year average ranging from 15 to 38). In the Yellowstone Ecosystem, there were 52 observed in 2002, 38 in 2003, and 49 in 2004. Extrapolating from the number of females with newborn cubs, the total population point estimate in 2004 for the recovery area was 588 bears using the methods of Keating et al. (2003); this represents more than a doubling since listing when an estimated 250 bears occurred in the Yellowstone area. More than 600 bears are thought to inhabit the entire Yellowstone ecosystem.
 2. *Distribution targets:* The annual distribution target (at least 16 of 18 Bear Management Units [BMUs]) occupied by females with offspring) over a 6 year period have been exceeded since 1998. During 3 of these years (2000-2002), females with offspring were observed in all 18 BMUs and the 6-year objectives have been obtained in all 18 BMUs.
 3. *Mortality targets.* The approach toward setting mortality quotas changed in 2005. The old approach was based on no more than 4% human-caused mortalities in the minimum population of bears of all ages; of this quota no more than 30% could be female. The new approach sets a mortality quota of 9% for females 2 years old or older from all causes in the population aged 2+ (including estimates of unreported mortalities). Based on most recent data and standards, the female subquota has been achieved.
- The completion of grizzly bear management plans for the Yellowstone Ecosystem that provides an acceptable framework for post-delisting regulatory mechanisms for grizzly bear management. These regulatory mechanisms include:
 1. A Conservation Strategy adopted by state and federal land management agencies that details how habitat will be managed on federal lands in the Yellowstone Ecosystem. This Conservation Strategy provides high levels of habitat security for grizzly bears in a core area (the Primary Conservation Area [PCA] of 5.9 million acres centered on Yellowstone National Park [34.4%] and National Forest lands [58.5%]).
 2. A Biological Assessment (BA) submitted by the U.S. Forest Service to the Fish and Wildlife Service by the 6 National Forests surrounding Yellowstone. This BA includes the substance of the Final Environmental Impact Assessment for the package of plan revisions initiated by the Forest Service to specify how habitat will

¹ List of publications available at: <http://www.nrmssc.usgs.gov/products/igbstpub.htm>. PDF files of the 2005 monograph also available on this site.

be managed for grizzly bears subsequent to delisting both within and outside of the PCA. The BA provides for maintaining “the productivity, to the extent feasible of the 4 key grizzly bear food sources” and emphasizes maintaining and restoring whitebark pine stands “inside and outside the PCA”.

3. The Grizzly bear management plans completed and adopted by the states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. These plans specify that grizzly bears will continue to colonize and occupy “biologically suitable and socially acceptable habitats”. The management plan for all 3 states specifies that grizzly bear distribution may increase following delisting. The plans for Montana and Idaho allow for increases in bear numbers while the plan for Wyoming calls for stabilization of bear numbers. The plans for all 3 states commit to keeping grizzly bear mortalities below quotas established by the interagency grizzly bear study team.
- The Memoranda of Understanding that are in place between state and federal agencies that agree to continue ongoing efforts to establish connectivity between the Yellowstone Ecosystem and other identified recovery areas following delisting of grizzly bears.
 - The well-designed monitoring and research program laid out in the Conservation Strategy that is designed to monitor abundance, distribution and mortality is adequate to accomplish these objectives as long as it is adequately funded.
 - The inclusion in the Conservation Strategy of provisions for adaptive management adjustments should unforeseen threats or circumstances arise.
 - The inclusion in the Conservation Strategy of review mechanisms that would lead to relisting of the species in circumstances where unforeseen circumstances yielding declines in populations through loss of key foods, excessive mortalities, or failure to implement current plans or strategies. If grizzly bears decline following delisting, the Chapter’s position is that relisting is a more appropriate response than not delisting in anticipation that such circumstances *might* arise. The possibility of future declines from a number of causes can never be positively eliminated and perpetual listing of a species based on speculative future threats is not consistent with the intent of the ESA.

The Chapter observes that the beneficial effects of the Conservation Strategy, the state management plans, and the Forest Plan amendments are contingent upon delisting and will not be implemented absent delisting. The Chapter is cognizant that funding of the monitoring program and full implementation of the habitat protection provisions of the Conservation Strategy are subject to uncertainties that cannot be fully anticipated. We believe, however, that the level of commitment evidenced in the recovery efforts to date by both state and federal agencies bodes well for the full implementation of the Conservation Strategy. The Chapter observes that the ESA was not designed or intended to be the management paradigm for species that are not endangered or declining toward endangered status.

The Montana Chapter of The Wildlife Society further observes that recovery efforts for grizzly bears in the other 5 recovery areas identified in the Recovery Plan have lagged behind the successful recovery effort in Yellowstone. We urge the Fish and Wildlife Service to focus renewed attention on these recovery areas using the successful model that has resulted in the recovery of grizzlies in the Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Approved by the Executive Board of the Montana Chapter The Wildlife Society on January 13, 2006.

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President
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