



# THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

Leaders in Wildlife Science, Management and Conservation

## Issue Statement

### Delisting of Grizzly Bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem

The population of grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos*) in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) was rapidly declining by 1975 when the species was appropriately listed as “threatened” under the newly enacted Endangered Species Act (ESA). In the ensuing decades, state and federal managers and researchers worked cooperatively to develop a framework for recovery and have implemented that framework in the GYE more successfully and completely than in the other five recovery areas identified in the national Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan. This plan, originally released in 1982, has been periodically updated with new population estimates and recovery criteria for the GYE population that reflect the best available science to date. As mandated by the ESA, the recovery plan for GYE grizzly bears identified population and habitat management goals that permitted delisting only when recovery was achieved and sustained.

Because of implementation of the Recovery Plan, and the accompanying Conservation Strategy – a planning mechanism for implementing the targets of the Recovery Plan both before and after delisting – population size, distribution, and mortality targets have all been consistently met. Updates made to the Conservation Strategy in 2016 identified important habitat protections, regulatory mechanisms, monitoring, and research designed to ensure continued security of a delisted grizzly bear population in the GYE. As these populations continue to be monitored, the Conservation Strategy will in turn be updated at least every five years, in partnership with federal, state, and tribal officials, to ensure the continued success and maintenance of this population.

The Conservation Strategy as currently implemented provides high levels of habitat security for grizzly bears in a core Primary Conservation Area (PCA) of 2.4 million hectares (5.9 million acres) including Yellowstone National Park and portions of five surrounding national forests. In addition to the PCA, the Conservation Strategy includes additional surrounding national forests and other lands as a buffer zone around the core. In this buffer zone, the Conservation Strategy provides protections that are not as restrictive as the core area but still provide significant additional oversight for the recovered population. The Conservation Strategy also includes grizzly bear management plans that have been adopted by state and tribal wildlife agencies in Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) determined that these agency plans represented adequate regulatory mechanisms to ensure that recovery would continue subsequent to delisting.

These regulatory mechanisms also were deemed adequate by the judiciary after USFWS was sued in 2007 because of the agency’s first attempt to delist the population. However, plaintiffs were successful in their argument that USFWS did not adequately consider how a decline in whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) populations, an important source of food for GYE grizzly bears, would affect continued management of the species.

The June 2017 delisting decision addresses this issue in part by pointing to a 2013 review conducted by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, a collection of federal, state, and tribal

agency partners, showing that in years with poor whitebark pinecone production, this generalist omnivore adapts by shifting its diet to other readily available food sources. The study team found that when comparing years of high whitebark pine production to those of low whitebark pine production, there was no notable difference in body mass and percentage body fat within the population.

Because of the collaborative research by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team and efforts by other coordinating bodies, such as the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, the GYE grizzly bear is likely one of the best understood and monitored wildlife populations in North America. Even with this exceptional level of information, it is not possible to predict with certainty what the impacts of future events might have on this population of grizzly bears, or the other species upon which it relies.

In September 2018, a federal judge reversed the 2017 delisting of grizzly bears in the GYE. Planned hunts in Idaho and Wyoming were cancelled as a result of the lawsuit. The court found that the USFWS failed to use the best available science in its delisting decision by not considering effects of delisting *per se* on other grizzly bear populations in the lower 48 United States. It also found that the USFWS's evaluation of threats facing GYE grizzly bears was flawed. In December 2018, the USFWS announced its plan to appeal the decision. Until that case is decided, GYE grizzly bears remains listed as threatened under the ESA.

The Conservation Strategy designated a specific monitoring program that should detect significant changes in either populations or habitat of the delisted GYE grizzly bear should such changes occur because of climate change or other uncertainties. Managers could then make appropriate changes in conservation strategies. Removing ESA protection for a species does not require identification of effective responses that guaranteed protection against all future scenarios. This would represent an insurmountable barrier for delisting any species and would violate the intent of the ESA to delist species once biologically sound recovery targets are achieved.

Because management targets, as set forth in the recovery plan, consistently are being met and adequate plans to manage grizzly bears post-delisting are in place, the position of The Wildlife Society regarding species regarding the GYE population of grizzly bears is to:

1. Endorse the USFWS's delisting of the grizzly bear population in the GYE from the Endangered Species Act so long as recovery targets continue to be met and demographic thresholds are maintained.
2. Endorse state grizzly bear management plans that specify the grizzly bear will continue to colonize and occupy available habitat and commit to keeping grizzly bear mortalities below quotas established by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team.
3. Urge involved agencies to continue to follow management and monitoring protocols outlined in the Conservation Strategy to demonstrate that a species can

be removed from the federal list of threatened and endangered species and successfully persist.

4. Endorse the review protocols in the Conservation Strategy that ensure grizzly bears in the GYE will be relisted because of substantial declines in the population resulting from loss of key foods such as whitebark pine seeds, excessive mortalities, or other reasons.
5. Urge the USFWS to renew attention that focuses on grizzly bear recovery in the Northern Continental Divide, Cabinet Yaak, Selkirk, North Cascades and Bitterroot ecosystems because without progress in these other recovery areas, the GYE population will remain isolated. We also urge the USFWS to continue to apply the programmatic model that has resulted in successful recovery of the grizzly bear in the GYE to the other recovery areas.
6. Acknowledge the vitally important role the ESA plays in maintaining biodiversity within the United States as evidenced by successful implementation of the Act in recovering the grizzly bear in the GYE.
7. Endorse the general principle that, on biological issues, it is appropriate for the legal system to defer to the expertise of agency biologists absent compelling reasons for not doing so.
8. Recognize that if the GYE grizzly bear population goals set out in the Conservation Strategy are not maintained, relisting may be warranted.

*The Wildlife Society's [Position Statement on The U.S. Endangered Species Act](#) states that the Society's policy is to "Assure that decisions under the ESA are transparent, replicable, and based on robust analyses of the best scientific data available (TWS 2017). The Wildlife Society's [Standing Position on Conserving Biological Diversity](#) states that the Society's policy is to "Support and promote policies and programs to conserve biological diversity that are biologically, socially, environmentally, and economically valid, effective, and practical."*

*Approved by TWS' Executive Committee May 2019*