



GRIZZLY BEAR MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR WESTERN MONTANA

FINAL PROGRAMMATIC
ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT
2006-2016



*With input from the
Montana Grizzly Bear Working Groups
and other interested parties*

December 2006



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*With input from the
Montana Grizzly Bear Working Groups
and other interested parties*

December 2006

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Front Cover: Grizzly bear (*Ursus arctos*). Sketch drawn by Clint E. Chapman.

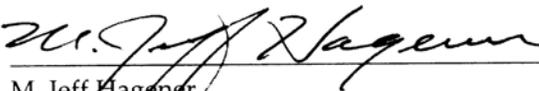
FWP DECISION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks hereby issues a decision to adopt the Preferred Alternatives. This decision includes a commitment to making certain budgeting and management decisions, to develop and implement new program initiatives, and to seek necessary approval of other agencies.

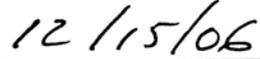
This decision meets with FWP's grizzly bear management objectives to maintain grizzly bear populations that are compatible with the public's outdoor recreational desires while minimizing human-bear conflicts and livestock depredation. The decision also meets with the objectives set forth in the FEIS to set appropriate grizzly bear management objectives for Montana's biologically suitable and socially acceptable habitats; improve FWP's ability to monitor grizzly bear populations and determine their status, composition and trend; improve regulation of the annual harvest should this occur; improve public understanding of grizzly bear biology, habitat requirements and management; and to develop policies and proactive programs to deal with human-bear confrontations and livestock depredation.

The ultimate benefit of the decision is the long-term perpetuation of viable, healthy grizzly bear populations that can provide aesthetic and recreational benefits to Montanans and visitors to our state.

Concurred on by FWP Commission by action at its December 14, 2006, meeting.



M. Jeff Hagener
Director



Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people participated in the development of this plan. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) would like to express gratitude to all those who committed their time and energy to ensure our program was adequate to meet the needs of bears and the people who live with them. FWP would like to recognize the following individuals who assisted in the document process and preparation: Margaret Morelli, Joan Buhl, Julie VanWinkle, and Tom Palmer.

Special recognition is due to the following individuals and organizations for their assistance through participation in our workshops. By recognizing their participation, we are by no means implying that they support the plan in part or in its entirety. Their openness and willingness to contribute have, however, made this a better plan. These meetings were productive because of the skill of our facilitator, Virginia Tribe, and we thank her as well.

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Yaak Valley Forest Council
Plum Creek Timber
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US Forest Service
USGS Biological Resources Division
Blackfeet Tribe
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1. INTRODUCTION

Vision Statement

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) envisions a future with a secure, recovered population of grizzly bears in western Montana that includes core populations of 500 or more grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide area and 90-125 grizzly bears in the Cabinet-Yaak area. We envision grizzly bear management programs throughout western Montana that are similar to other resident species and which maintain effective biological connections between these two core areas and linkage of these areas with populations to the north in Canada and to potential habitat in the Bitterroot area to the south. It is our vision that one day the populations in western Montana will also interact with the existing population in the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA).

Background to State Plan

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), in cooperation with FWP, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), National Parks Service (NPS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Blackfoot Tribe and Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes, currently manages grizzly bears in Montana as “threatened” under authority of the Endangered Species Act. This cooperative management is under the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) within which all agencies and tribes are partners. FWP prepared this grizzly bear management plan and final programmatic environmental impact statement (FPEIS) as a way of expressing the State’s ongoing commitment to ensuring the continued expansion and recovery of the species. Moreover, FWP recognizes that successful recovery of grizzly bears requires an integrated approach that balances and incorporates the biological requirements of the bear within a broader social, economic and political framework.

Within western Montana, grizzly bear populations and their habitats are managed under the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan utilizing a management approach that identifies recovery zones and adjacent areas where occupancy by grizzly bears is anticipated and biologically and socially acceptable. This document deals with the State’s programs for managing grizzly bears throughout the region over the next 10 years. Upon approval by the FWP Director, the department will begin implementing this plan in accordance with and in cooperation with the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, to the extent possible under constraints of the federal Endangered Species Act until grizzlies are delisted.

FWP recognizes that a broader Conservation Strategy or post delisting management plan will have to be developed for each defined Distinct Population Segment (DPS) defined by the USFWS as per existing regulations, to identify and document specific requirements, including population and habitat standards, which the USFWS will need to meet recovery objectives. Each Conservation Strategy will be jointly developed with other agencies and additional public scrutiny. In order to meet requirements for delisting, all agencies involved will need to sign a Conservation Strategy Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

Process for Plan Development

FWP developed this plan and FPEIS through a series of meetings with affected agencies, governments, interested persons, and groups. FWP initiated the scoping processes with discussion of potential issues and alternative actions after completion of the management plan in southwestern Montana in 2002. Following these preliminary efforts, FWP held a series of 11 public scoping meetings in western Montana

during May and June 2004 (Great Falls, Kalispell, Missoula, Choteau, Eureka, Hamilton, Helena, Libby, Lincoln, Seeley Lake, and Thompson Falls). FWP solicited written comments throughout 2004 via news releases, press interviews, and personal contacts. During these meetings, FWP sought to identify issues likely to involve significant impacts and those issues not likely to involve significant impacts, as well as alternatives for grizzly bear management.

To further develop issues and ideas for possible alternatives, FWP held a series of facilitated meetings in Missoula, Kalispell, and Great Falls with interested groups and individuals during September 2004. FWP invited the participation of those individuals and groups that had expressed interest in additional participation as well as other affected agencies. Following these meetings, a draft management plan was produced and resubmitted to a broader group of interested parties including those who attended the September 2004 meetings. Additional facilitated meetings were held in these same cities during September 2005 to review and discuss approaches presented in the preliminary draft plan with the purpose of fine-tuning the draft. All of the meetings were open to the public. The Department released the draft programmatic environmental impact statement in early June 2006 and provided a 90-day comment period that ended on October 3, 2006. The Department also conducted 11 formal public hearings in the communities where the scoping meetings had been held to gather additional public input. Comments received were used to modify and prepare this FPEIS. A summary of comments received on the DPEIS and the Department's responses are presented in Appendix AA.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Goals for the Grizzly Bear

FWP has statewide goals for wildlife resources. More specifically, this plan deals with grizzly bears in western Montana as an approved plan is in place for southwestern Montana. The goals of this plan are:

1. Statewide Goal - To provide the people of Montana and visitors with optimum outdoor recreational opportunities emphasizing the tangible and intangible values of wildlife and natural and cultural resources of aesthetic, scenic, historic, scientific, and archaeological significance in a manner that:
 - a. Is consistent with the capabilities and requirements of the resources
 - b. Recognizes present and future human needs and desires, and
 - c. Ensures maintenance and enhancement of the quality of the environment.
2. Wildlife Program Goal - To protect, perpetuate, enhance, and regulate the wise use of wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future.
3. Grizzly Bear Management Goal - To manage for a recovered grizzly bear population in western Montana and to provide for a continuing expansion of that population into areas that are biologically suitable and socially acceptable. This should allow FWP to achieve and maintain population levels that support managing the bear as a game animal along with other species of native wildlife and provide some regulated hunting when and where appropriate.

These goals will be achieved by addressing the following issues identified early in the planning process: human safety and education, habitat and population monitoring and management, future distribution, motorized and non-motorized trails programs, livestock conflicts, property damage, conflict guidelines, hunting opportunities, enforcement concerns, and funding. The success of grizzly bear management in Montana will be contingent upon FWP's ability to address these issues in a way that builds social support for grizzlies.

President Theodore Roosevelt stated: "The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value". It is FWP's hope that this plan will allow the next generation of Montanans to manage a grizzly bear population that has increased in both numbers and distribution in western Montana.

Development of this plan is further guided by utilizing the success of the Yellowstone Recovery effort and management plan for southwestern Montana. Among the key recommendations in that plan was support for continued joint federal and state management of the proposed Primary Conservation Area (PCA) as a secure "core" area for grizzly bears within the Yellowstone Ecosystem. The southwestern Montana plan also recommended that the state develop a management plan for the area outside the PCA to:

1. Ensure the long-term viability of bears and avoid the need to re-list the species under the Endangered Species Act.
2. Support expansion of grizzly bears beyond the PCA in areas that are biologically suitable and socially acceptable.
3. Manage the grizzly bear as a game animal including allowing regulated hunting, when and where appropriate.

A similar course is being recommended for western Montana. Thus, Montana's approach to managing grizzly bears will be outlined in two region specific documents. In the future when these plans need revision, FWP intends to incorporate both the southwestern and western grizzly bear management plans into one inclusive plan. This will provide a document that addresses grizzly bear management across the entire western portion of the State.

Purpose and Need

Grizzly bear management in Montana is being addressed within the framework of the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) and its regulations. MEPA is patterned after the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, and throughout the process of plan development FWP has attempted to follow the intent of this national statute.

As this grizzly bear program has the potential to impact the human environment, in keeping with MEPA guidelines, FWP has prepared a programmatic review that addresses the impacts of the proposed actions. Throughout the process, FWP also evaluated the significance of impacts as a result of these proposed actions as required in Section 12.2.431 of the Administrative Rules of Montana. Potential impacts could be adverse, beneficial or both, in terms of their impact on the quality of human environment. These impacts were addressed by following established guidelines, which require us to address such factors as the severity, duration, geographic extent and frequency of occurrence of any impacts. In addition, the plan addresses the probabilities that impacts will occur and any affects of such impacts on economic growth in Montana. FWP also addressed the cumulative nature of these impacts and the importance of this program on the state and society. It is recognized that these programs are a compilation of department efforts as well as other state, local and federal programs and their statutory requirements. As such, some of the impacts are not directly attributable to department programs; however, they are included in the document for completeness.

This plan and final programmatic impact statement deals directly with the portion of western Montana that encompasses the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE), the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem

(CYE), the Bitterroot Ecosystem and adjacent lands in western Montana. The proposed action of this document is to create and adapt a management program for the entire area of western and northwestern Montana.

The need for this western plan was precipitated by changes in bear management in Montana during the 1980-90s, resulting in increasing numbers and expanding distribution of grizzly bears in western Montana. Current approaches to land management, wildlife management, and recreation within the NCDE appear to be providing the conditions needed to establish a population of bears outside the recovery zone. Recovery to date in the Cabinet-Yaak area has however been slow and tenuous at best, and recovery has yet to begin in the Bitterroot ecosystem. In principle, it is FWP's objective to maintain existing renewable resource management and recreational use where possible and to develop a process whereby FWP, working with local publics, can respond to demonstrated problems with appropriate management changes. By striving to maintain existing uses, which allow people to continue their lifestyles, economies, and feelings of well being, this approach builds support and increases tolerance for an expanding grizzly bear population.

Along these same lines, the Governors' Roundtable in southwestern Montana produced a recommendation to allow grizzly bears to inhabit areas that are "biologically suitable and socially acceptable." The level of social acceptance of grizzlies in historic habitat varies, depending on how issues are approached, and how much faith people have in management being responsible and responsive. To maximize the area of Montana that is "socially acceptable" grizzly bear range, the state planning and management effort for western Montana will employ adaptive management strategies to develop innovative, on-the-ground management. By demonstrating that grizzly bear conservation can be integrated with broader social goals, public faith in management can be enhanced and human tolerance of grizzly bears increased. Such an approach has already demonstrated success in northwestern Montana along the Rocky Mountain Front, where bear populations have increased and bears have reoccupied habitats from which they had been absent for decades. By employing such an approach, this document provides a strategy for initiating, implementing, and learning from a set of localized efforts.

This process will entail developing a set of strategies on a relatively small scale of Ranger Districts, Conservation Districts, valleys or watersheds. FWP, local citizens, other agencies, and local and national interest organizations would cooperatively design strategies tailored to local conditions. These strategies would include monitoring provisions that would require management adaptations as conditions dictate or change. Ultimately, all parties would collectively learn from these localized efforts. This should result in developing a basis of knowledge for replicating efforts elsewhere and incorporating successes in the statewide management of the grizzly bear and other species. The underlying basis for this approach is that as bears reoccupy areas from which they have been absent for decades, there are many issues that can't be anticipated or predicted with accuracy. Consequently, this approach allows FWP to adjust the program as necessary.

Localized efforts have many advantages. For example:

- They tend to generate productive, focused solutions.
- They provide low-conflict settings for trying out innovative ideas.
- They have tremendous local importance that can help increase political support (e.g. showing that ranchers can and do get along with grizzlies builds support for the agricultural community and for the benefits they provide to the rest of society).

An adaptive management approach is flexible and iterative in nature, and produces tangible results. In fact, innovative grizzly conservation efforts are already underway in Montana and we can make use of the lessons already available. This approach will be described in more detail in the local management section and will include annual reviews. Ultimately this plan and approach will be re-evaluated in 10 years to provide for a complete review of its successes and/or failures.

History of Bears and Bear Biology in Western Montana

The Eurasian brown bear and the North American grizzly are considered the same species (*Ursus arctos*). Current theory holds that this species developed its large size, aggressive temperament, flexible feeding habits, and adaptive nature in response to habitats created by intermittent glaciations. It is believed that ancestors of the grizzly bear migrated to North America from Siberia across a land bridge at the Bering Strait at least 50,000 years ago. As the continental ice sheet receded about 10,000 years ago, the species began to work its way south over post glacial North America.

The grizzly bear originally inhabited a variety of habitats from the Great Plains to mountainous areas throughout western North America, from central Mexico to the Arctic Ocean. European explorers encountered grizzlies throughout most of the American West. It is not known exactly how many grizzlies lived in the U.S. before 1700, but based on historical sightings and modern-day densities, it is estimated that around 50,000-100,000 bears lived in parts of 17 states.

Prior to 1800, grizzly bears were undoubtedly common in western Montana. With newly acquired access to firearms by indigenous people and westward expansion of settlers, bears began to be impacted. With no mechanisms to provide protection or management, almost without exception, bear numbers declined where human and bear came together for any length of time. The decline of the grizzly bear took less than 60 years, from the end of the trapping era in 1840 to the turn of the century. The decline was due to a number of factors including: a reduction of prey because of market hunting associated with gold exploration and mining; subsistence hunting associated with gold exploration and mining; construction of railroads, homesteading, and predator control; and loss of habitat related to ranching, farming, and human settlement. Much of the killing was based on the feeling, and in some cases fact, that the grizzly bear posed a threat to people and livestock.

By the 1870s, grizzly bears had disappeared from West Coast beaches and by the 1880s they had been extirpated from prairie river bottoms. In fact, by the turn of the century, they had disappeared from most broad, open mountain valleys. Fifteen years later, most foothill country lacked grizzlies.

Grizzlies were never eliminated from Montana, but their numbers probably reached their lowest levels in the 1920s. At that time, changes were made out of concern for the future of the species including designating grizzlies a "game animal" in 1923, the first such designation of the species in the lower 48 states. This change, together with early prohibitions on the use of dogs to hunt bears, outlawing baiting (both in 1921) and closing seasons, allowed grizzlies to survive in portions of western Montana.

Since that time, the degree of protection and the sophistication of management practices have grown steadily. In the 1940s, the importance of protecting fish and wildlife habitat began to emerge as a key public issue in wildlife management. Through all of the previous years, wildlife conservation was the goal, and was sought through the restriction and regulation of hunters and anglers. Although partially effective, regulations and laws failed to address a more fundamental issue: the protection of fish and wildlife habitat.

Early concern by the people of Montana allowed the grizzly bear to survive when it was lost in many other places and is evidenced in the fact that the state contains all or portions of four of the six areas in the lower 48 states identified by the USFWS plan for grizzly recovery (Figure 1). Habitat protection under state authority began with winter game range acquisitions in the 1940s and stream preservation in the early 1960s. Generally, concern for and protection of habitat appeared in state laws dealing with controlling natural resource development. These laws usually addressed specific resource issues such as surface mining and siting of major industrial facilities. An exception to this specific approach was the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) adopted in 1971. Montana MEPA law was mirrored in large part on the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) adopted by Congress in 1969. The Montana Fish and Game Commission (MFGC), today known as the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission (MFWPC), adopted rules for implementing MEPA. These rules provide for the preparation and distribution of an environmental analysis evaluating a series of actions, programs or policies that affect the quality of the human environment.

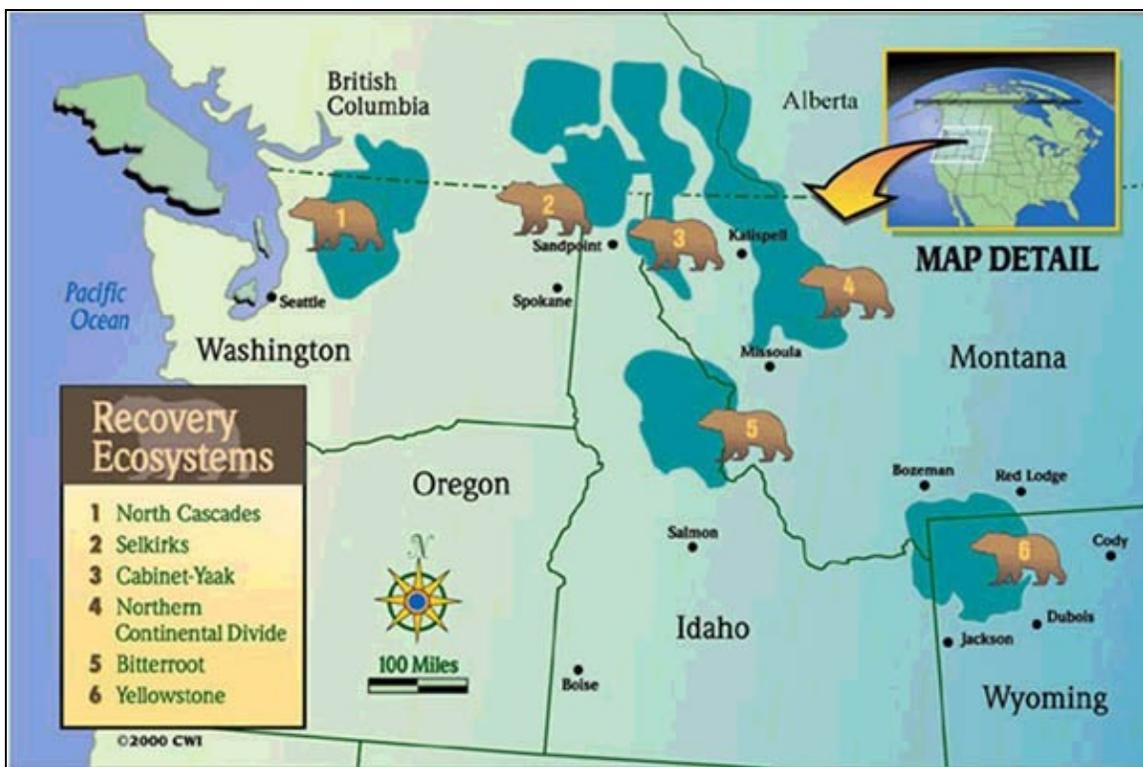


Figure 1. Grizzly bear recovery zones in the lower 48 states.

Montana’s concern continues today as demonstrated by the fact that the species is Montana’s “State Animal,” and there is specific policy directing management of the species. Grizzly bear populations are currently increasing, and expanding, in the Yellowstone and portions of the Northern Continental Divide area. A small population of grizzly bears in the Cabinet-Yaak area of Montana appears to have increased from the 1970s but may be declining at present. While there are currently no documented grizzlies in the Bitterroot ecosystem, individual animals have been sighted in the vicinity.

It is important to recognize that the presence of a viable grizzly bear population is very important to many people in Montana as well as nationally. This species provides one example of why Montana is

such a special place to live, work, and recreate. Many people travel to Montana with the hope of seeing a bear and the stories of such encounters are retold many times. There are also clear economic benefits associated with tourism, recreation, and potential harvest from the presence of grizzlies. While FWP is fully aware that there are also costs and potential risks associated with the presence of such a species, this plan should allow FWP to manage these in a way that meets the needs of the public. In light of this, the State of Montana has adopted the following policy for this species.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission Policy

The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission (MFWPC) is the policy making arm of Montana's fish, wildlife, and parks programs. Section 87-1-301(1), Montana Codes Annotated (MCA) requires the Commission to "set policies for the protection, preservation, and propagation of the wildlife, fish, game, furbearers, waterfowl, non-game species, and endangered species of the state for the fulfillment of all other responsibilities of FWP as provided by law."

The legislature has given specific policy direction to the Commission on the issue of grizzly bears. Section 87-5-301, MCA, states "It is hereby declared the policy of the State of Montana to protect, conserve, and manage grizzly bears as a rare species of Montana wildlife." Section 87-5-302 describes the FWP Commission's power regarding grizzly bears.

In addition, within this legal framework, the MFWPC developed a grizzly bear policy in Section 12.9.103, ARM (Appendix A). This policy addresses the need to protect grizzly bear habitat, the need to pursue grizzly bear research, the role of regulated hunting in grizzly bear management, depredations and the appropriate FWP response to depredations, and requires compliance with federal regulations relating to grizzly bears. It is within this framework, and that described by the Endangered Species Act (16 U.S.C. Sec. 1531, et seq.), that specific FWP goals for the grizzly bear were developed. Because of high mortality rates resulting from sudden closure of open dumps in Yellowstone National Park, concern over the status of the grizzly population in the Greater Yellowstone Area rapidly increased during the late 1960s and early 1970s. This population, along with other grizzly populations in the lower 48 states, was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1975. As a result of this listing, many management changes were made to benefit grizzlies. A recovery plan was prepared and approved in 1982 and revised in 1993. This has set the stage for a possible delisting of the species in the Yellowstone area and a return of this species to state management, which is predicated on a state management plan. It is our hope that the success of these programs will result in recovered bear populations across western Montana as well.