State and federal agencies say it’s time to take Yellowstone region grizzly bears off the threatened species list. By Tom Dickson

During a recent late August morning, Kevin Frey drives up Paradise Valley on U.S. Highway 89 toward Yellowstone National Park. Pointing toward mountains surrounding the valley’s fields of grazing cattle, irrigated alfalfa, and newly constructed ranchettes, the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks bear management specialist says grizzlies in that high country have begun beefing up to build fat reserves for hibernation, less than three months away. The bears consume grass, forbs, berries, roots, ants, moths, small mammals, elk carcasses—you name it. Some follow the natural foods down to the foothills and valley floor, where they encounter apple trees, garbage cans, dog food, and livestock. Most ignore the human-produced temptations, but a few give in. That’s when the problems start.

Many people hold strong opinions about grizzlies, from reverence to hostility. But very few, like Frey, actually work with the bears: collaring, tranquilizing, trapping, relocating, and sometimes even having to make the hard decision to euthanize those that pose a severe threat. Frey takes calls from the rancher who lost a calf, or the parents who spotted a grizzly the night before out by the garage. He works in Montana’s portion of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) where grizzlies and people live together, mostly in harmony but sometimes not. His job: Help resolve conflicts and prevent new ones from flaring up.

Tall and soft-spoken, with a mustache grayed in part by job stress, Frey is on the front lines of the current controversy over removing (“delisting”) the GYE grizzly bear population from the federal list of threatened species. Environmental groups, Indian tribes, and many scientists, including luminaries E. O. Wilson and Jane Goodall, say it’s too soon to end federal protection and give management authority back to Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. On the other side are federal and state wildlife agencies, with their own highly credentialed scientists, who point out that the current population of at least 717 bears far exceeds the recovery goal of 500, and conservation guarantees for sustained recovery are in place. Delisting, they say, is long overdue.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) director Dan Ashe has hailed the Yellowstone grizzly recovery as a “historic success” for wildlife conservation. The population is so healthy, in fact, that bears are now spilling out of the recovery area. As a result, surrounding states say they need more flexibility to respond to new and growing conflicts so that bears and humans can coexist.

Based on studies by state and federal scientists on the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, the USFWS in March 2016 proposed removing the GYE grizzly bear population from the list of federally protected species. The federal agency, now reviewing public comments on the proposal, has said...
"I haven’t been working on bears for 30 years just to sit back and watch them disappear."

—KEVIN FREY, FWP Bear Management Specialist, in the Paradise Valley north of Yellowstone National Park

It will make its decision soon.

As we drive south toward Gardiner, Frey points to places where he has seen and trapped grizzlies. One bear tore up the upholstery of an SUV parked in a driveway. Another broke into a cabin. Along the Yellowstone River a bold bear pulled a mini-fridge from a building next to a bed-and-breakfast. "Human safety is always on our mind when we deal with bear conflicts," Frey says. Last June a grizzly broke into a house at night while a couple in their 80s was sleeping upstairs. They were scared but unharmed by the ursine intruder. "We put up electric fence around the house and set traps," Frey says. "The bear never returned, but I didn’t sleep well for weeks."

Bears are unharmed by the ursine intruder. "We put up electric fence around the house and set traps," Frey says. "The bear never returned, but I didn’t sleep well for weeks."

"A lot of what we’ve done is help build tolerance among the people who live with bears by responding when they need help," says Frey. To help reduce bear conflicts with people and livestock, the federal government closed backcountry logging roads and ended sheep grazing allotments in national forests. The federal government also killed repeat offenders when necessary. Before federal listing, most grizzly deaths in the Yellowstone region occurred when park rangers were forced to trap and euthanize bold bears threatening people in campgrounds and picnic areas. After listing, the park eventually reduced mortality by closing garbage dumps and, using the mantra "A fed bear is a dead bear," teaching campers to keep food locked up. Meanwhile, state biologists worked with ranchers and farmers to bury dead livestock and install electric fencing around calving areas and beehives. They also killed repeat offenders when necessary. "A lot of what we’ve done is help build tolerance among the people who live with bears by responding when they need help," says Frey. To help reduce bear conflicts with people and livestock, the federal government closed backcountry logging roads and ended sheep grazing allotments in national forests near the park. Recovery efforts worked beyond anyone’s expectations. Though some grizzly bears that repeatedly attack livestock or pose a threat to humans are still trapped and either relocated or put down, the GYE population has steadily grown. By the early 2000s, the federal government announced that numbers had reached the recovery goal of 500. In 2007 the USFWS delisted the population. Environmental groups immediately sued the agency. They argued that the bears were at increased risk because increasingly warmer winters had exacerbated an infestation of mountain pine beetles, killing millions of whitebark pines, whose seeds are an important grizzly food. The 9th Circuit Court agreed. It ordered the population put back on the list of threatened species and directed the USFWS to study the effects of climate change and whitebark pine on the population.

While many grizzly advocates cheered the decision, communities and ranchers in the Yellowstone region braced themselves for more bear problems.

LIVESTOCK LOSSES

On the Beartooth Plateau in south-central Montana near the Wyoming border, Justin Hossfeld stops his pickup just off the Beartooth Highway, one of the nation’s most scenic routes. During two months in 2015, a female grizzly bear killed at least 11 cows in this one-square-mile area of Scotch Coulee, he says. The bear was eventually trapped and relocated 100 miles away, but recently...
another grizzly moved in from nearby Custer National Forest. “It killed ayearling heifer over there last week, and we’llprobably lose one heifer per week until hiberna-
tion,” says Hossfeld, project manager for Sun-
light Ranch Corporation, which operates ten ranches in Montana and Wyoming.

Nearby stands a small house where two
bicycles lie beneath a swing set. Hossfeld
points toward a brushy ravine 200 yards
from the yard. “We’re pretty sure the bear
shows up there somewhere, sleeping,” he says.

This ranch is one of dozens in the GYE
experiencing increasing livestock losses
from grizzlies spreading out from their core
habitat. Wyoming ranchers reported a 68
percent increase in livestock incidents from
2011 to 2014, from 77 to 130, despite meas-
tures taken to reduce conflicts. For his part,
Hossfeld says he conducts calving earlier in
spring before most bears emerge from hi-
bernation, moves calves from pastures to
feedlots with more human presence, and
has replaced Angus cattle with a wilder
breed better able to fend off predators.

Though the preventive measures have helped, bear attacks continue.

Over the past three years, the Montana
Livestock Loss Board has paid state ranchers
roughly market value for each confirmed
grizzly loss to a cattle bear. But that doesn’t
cover decreased cow conception rates and
weight loss from stress or his increased labor
costs, Hossfeld says. “We’ve got cow-
boys out riding all night with cattle,”

Unlike smaller ranches that lose livestock to bears, Sunlight can absorb the losses. “But at some point, if the cattle operation isn’t profitable, the land will be sold off for other uses,”

Hossfeld says. Red Lodge, a popular gate-
way town to the Beartooth Range, is just ten
minutes away. Conversion of this rangeland
to new roads and subdivisions would further
fragment habitat used by grizzlies and
other wildlife.

CRITICS’ CONCERNS

U.S. Geological Survey senior research biolo-
ist Frank van Manen has led the Inter-
agency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBST)
since 2012. At his office just off the Montana
State University campus in Bozeman, he pulls
out a file of reports he and other team
members have written on Yellowstone grizzlies in recent years. A past president
of the International Association for Bear Re-
search and Management with a PhD in eco-
logy and statistics, van Manen is considered
one of the world’s foremost experts on bear
population dynamics. He has answers to
delisting critics’ three main concerns.

One concern is the decline in two impor-
tant grizzly bear nutrient sources. “In the last
decade, climate change has decimated the
Yellowstone grizzly’s most important food,
the whitebark pine nut,” wrote Doug Pea-
cock, noted grizzly bear author, in a widely
published letter to President Barack
Obama this past June denouncing the delist-

ning proposal. Indeed, 40 to 75 percent of
cone-producing whitebark pines in the GYE
have died since the early 2000s. Another
increasingly rare grizzly food is the Yellow-
stone cutthroat trout. The trout live in Yellowstone
Lake and spawn in tributaries, where they
provide a protein boost each spring to local eagles and bears. Cutthroat numbers have
decreased by 95 percent following the illegal
introduction of predatory non-native lake
trout into the lake in the mid-1980s.

Loss of these foods, delisting opponents
maintain, makes the GYE grizzly population
more vulnerable and thus in need of contin-
ued federal protection. They point out that the population has not been increasing as quickly as it was two decades ago. The
growth rate between 1983 and the late
1990s ranged from 4 to 7 percent per year,
but has since slowed to 0 to 2 percent an-
ually. Critics claim the lack of high-protein food is slowing population growth and ac-
counts for grizzlies spreading farther from
their core habitat.

Yet the IGBST discovered that grizzlies
have found plenty of alternative foods to eat
without having to leave their normal home
range, van Manen says. Highly adaptable,
grizzly bears consume more than 260
different food sources and historically
thrived in arid environments as far south as
Mexico. Whitebark pine nuts and cutthroat
tROUT can be important foods, but when
supplies dwindle grizzlies easily switch to
other protein sources.

So what accounts for the population
growth slowdown? Increased cub and year-
ngrowing, says van Manen. IGBST scien-
tists found lower cub survival in areas of
highest bear densities, indicating the popula-
tion has become so dense that some adult
males may be killing cubs. As the contin-
ued spread of grizzlies, it appears the prime
habitat is at capacity, forcing males to seek
out new territory.

GENETICALLY HEALTHY

Delisting critics also worry about the GYE
population’s genetic isolation, which leads
to inbreeding and the need for new blood.
The concerns are not warranted, says van
Manen. His study team recently docu-
mented only a 0.2 percent decline in genetic
diversity over the past 25 years, indicating
no evidence of inbreeding. “Sure, it would
be desirable if the GYE grizzlies and, say, the
NCDE grizzlies were connected genetically,
but it’s not essential,” he says. According to
van Manen, the Yellowstone population’s
health will likely be fine for several
hundred years if population levels remain
steady. “And we can always introduce bears
from other populations to enhance genetic
diversity if need be,” he says. The research
dsuggests that grizzlies are now showing
up between the GYE and NCDE popula-
tions, like in the upper Big Hole and the
Elkhorn Mountains this year, indicating that
ingression may soon occur naturally.

The third concern is hunting. Under the
delisting proposal, all three states—
Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho—would allow some sport hunting of grizzly bears
(see sidebar, page 22). Opponents fear that
hunters would shoot bears near Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks. That
would deprive visitors of seeing the popular
attractions and in turn reduce tourism
revenue in local communities. “Grizzlies’
rarity has made them valuable assets,
economically worth far more alive than as a
person’s rug or trophy,” writes Todd Wilkin-
son of Bozeman in an opinion piece on the Na-
tional Geographic website.

State wildlife agencies concede that some
highly visible bears might be killed. But they
are confident hunting will not hurt the over-
all grizzly population and will increase ac-
cceptance of bears by locals. The states have
agreed to maintain a population of at least
674 grizzlies, the average of the study team’s
population estimates from 2002 to 2014, in
an area comprising roughly 70 percent of the
GYE known as the Demographic Monitoring
Area. Highly regulated hunting would re-
move especially bold bears, increase griz-
zy wariness around humans, and reduce the
number of bears visiting rural homes and
communities. “As was the case with wolves, we
believe that when we have a regulated hunting
season, local animosity toward
grizzlies will decline,” says Ken McDonald,
head of the FWP Wildlife Division.

For van Manen, hunting is a matter of
public policy, not biology. “I recognize there is
a wide range of social values and concerns
about hunting, but biologically it would sim-
ply be another type of mortality.”

—FRANK VAN MANEN, Supervisory Research Wildlife Biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey and Team Leader of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, at his office near Montana State University in Bozeman

Hunting and bear populations

Montana’s black bear population, estimated at
13,000 animals, continues to thrive even as
the game species is managed with regulated
hunting.

The same would be true for grizzly bears. A certain
number of grizzlies die each year from natural factors
such as predation and disease, and human causes like
vehicle collisions, self-defense, and lethal removal. The
limited and highly regulated hunting seasons proposed
by the states following delisting would not, when added
to other mortality, be allowed to threaten recovery goals.

Under the GYE Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy signed by
the states, hunting would be allowed only if all other forms of mortality
drop below a certain percentage of the population necessary to keep
it stable at a target of 674 bears, the average number from 2002 to
2014. (Hunting would never be allowed in Yellowstone or Grand Teton
National Parks, though lethal removal by park rangers would continue if
necessary.) If the population exceeded 674, more liberal hunting har-
vests would be allowed. If it fell below 674, hunting harvest would
be severely curtailed. If numbers dropped below 600, no hunting
would be allowed in any state.

Now that Yellowstone region grizzlies are recov-
ered, hunting becomes a state concern, not a federal
one, says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife
Division. He maintains that the intent of Congress
in writing the Endangered Species Act was to address
threats that drive a species toward extinction—not to
evermore dictate all the nuances of how a population
might be managed. “Whether or not bears are hunted
is way beyond the scope of the ESA, as long as the overall threat
to the existence of the population is addressed,” McDonald says. “And
that is definitely the case with the protections, including overall mor-
tality thresholds, that will be in place after delisting.”

that increases the likelihood that bears will
threaten people and need to be killed—in numbers that would far exceed the limited hunting harvest. “The GYE region is
one of the fastest-growing rural areas in the
United States. According to a new Montana
State University study, the number of private
land tracts with one home per 40 acres in the
GYE increased 328 percent from 1970 to
2010, says Andy Hansen, director of the
university’s Landscape Biodiversity Lab.

OTHER LARGE Carnivores Thriving

For many people, the delisting issue comes
down to whether they trust the states to do right by grizzlies. Some claim federal officials are rushing delisting under pressure by state
wildlife officials eager to open hunting sea-
sons so they can generate “big bucks” and
drive populations down. “That’s simply not
the case,” says McDonald. “In fact, total rev-
_ enue from the relatively few licenses we’d
sell would only be about $1,000 per year.

And we have no desire to see the grizzly pop-
ulation substantially lower than it is today.”

According to McDonald, managing
grizzly bears in Montana now costs FWP
$650,000 per year. McDonald points to Montana’s manage-
ment of black bears, mountain lions, and
wolves, all healthy big game species managed with
regulated hunting seasons. Montana is
also home to the even larger NCDE popula-
tion, whose grizzly numbers have grown so
robust that bears are spilling east onto prairie
ranchlands and into towns.

What’s more, says McDonald, “even-
tly we’ve done to recover grizzlies, we’ll
keep doing to keep them recovered.” Under
an agreed-upon GYE Grizzly Bear Conserva-
tion Strategy, state and federal agencies will
continue to monitor populations, food sup-
plies, habitat threats, and bear mortality. The
agencies have also designated a six million-
acre Primary Conservation Area containing
the highest grizzly densities where mining,
logging, and energy development will remain
severely constrained.

All three states have also agreed to jointly
manage the GYE population as one popula-
tion. “None of us can go rogue, off on our
owns,” says McDonald. If any state reneges
on the agreement or if grizzly numbers drop
below 500, the USFWS could quickly relist
the bears on an emergency basis.

If the states don’t want to drive the GYE
population down and won’t profit from hunt-
ing, why the push for delisting? A big reason,
says McDonald, is that it would boost the
credibility of the ESA, already under attack by
conservative members of Congress. “Keeping
a species listed even after it greatly exceeds
recovery goals undermines the Endangered
Species Act itself and weakens local support
and cooperation for listing other species,” he
says. Frey thinks delisting would give people
who live in grizzly country more ownership.
“With ownership comes responsibility, and I
think people here accept that,” he says. “But
year that don’t create conflicts,” he says.

Responsiveness builds tolerance. Yet Fry
often can’t quickly settle grizzly issues
because federal regulations require time-
consuming procedures and approvals. “After
delisting, we should be able to resolve
conflicts much faster,” he says.

The bear management specialist says he can’t imagine the states ever allowing the grizzly population to reach a point where fed-
eral agencies would need to step back in. “I
haven’t been working on bears for 30 years
just to sit back and watch them disappear,” he says. Hundreds of bear proof garbage cans in
Big Sky, Red Lodge, Gardiner, and other
towns are examples of how communities are
working not to eliminate grizzlies but to
reduce conflicts and allow coexistence.

Hunters and hikers in grizzly country carry
bear spray both as self-defense and to
prevent incidents requiring a bear to be
killed. “I see a growing appreciation for bears
in this state,” Frey says. “My mom in Billings
likes knowing Montana has grizzlies. But she
surely didn’t want them in her yard.”