

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSES

All comments received were reviewed by FWP personnel. A substantive public comment was defined as the identification of a specific issue or impact. Some comments received were too vague to specifically address or were outside of the scope of the 2024 Grizzly Bear Management Plan ("Plan"). Some comments were already addressed in the Plan or Final Environmental Impact Statement ("FEIS"). In some cases, multiple individuals provided the same or similar substantive comments; these comments have been summarized, categorized, and a single FWP response is provided below. The following constitutes a synopsis of substantive public comments received and FWP's response to those comments. Page numbers correspond to the FEIS and Plan – **Track Changes Version B_Final** documents.

Connectivity

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Suggest the Plan's connectivity definition is unclear or inaccurate.
- Requested clarification on the difference between genetic and demographic connectivity.
- Identified contradictory statements in the Plan and Draft Environmental Impact Statement, to which they say leads to confusion and a lack of confidence in FWP's commitment to connecting grizzly bear populations.
- Believe grizzly bear populations, not just individuals, must exist within connectivity areas to ensure long-term connectivity.
- Disagree that human-assisted connectivity (periodically translocating a grizzly bear from one Ecosystem to another) is a solution to ensure connectivity, pointing out that "translocation" is not the same as "connectivity".
- Some reacted negatively to the idea that a bear translocated to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem ("GYE") for genetic purposes would be considered 'experimental' and possibly be treated differently from other bears within the GYE.
- Disagree with the idea that following a successful translocation an individual from the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem ("NCDE") to the GYE the mortality limit for that individual will be increased by one.
- Believe non-conflict bears captured within Ecosystems should be moved to connectivity areas to establish populations that would increase the likelihood of successful connectivity.
- Believe all places in Montana are important to connectivity including areas that provide no clear path for bears moving between populations, like areas of Central or Eastern Montana.
- Want to see natural recovery of grizzly bears throughout Montana (*i.e.*, no translocations).
- Want outlined criteria on what warrants lethal removal of a grizzly bear outside of core areas.
- Believe FWP's proposed plan to remove bears in connectivity areas that get into conflict is misguided.
- Believe the Plan implies grizzly bears found outside of core areas—and in areas deemed unimportant to connectivity—could be removed proactively to avoid conflict with humans, attractants, and livestock.
- Believe the Plan suggests an overreliance on lethal removal of problem grizzly bears rather than FWP working to prevent grizzly bear-human conflicts in connectivity areas. Not trying to proactively prevent conflicts could result in bears moving between Ecosystems encountering unsecured attractants and humans unfamiliar with what is required to coexist with grizzly bears.
- Believe FWP and partners are not doing enough to conserve habitat between Ecosystems.
- Suggest FWP is not doing enough to increase the ability of grizzly bears to cross highways safely to facilitate connectivity.
- Believe grizzly bears should not be hunted in areas important to connectivity, while others believe grizzly bears should be aggressively managed outside of any recovery Ecosystem.

- Believe the use of snares for wolf trapping and the use of hounds for hunting black bears within connectivity areas will limit the ability of grizzly bears to move between Ecosystems and result in incidental grizzly bear mortality.
- Believe some maps presented in the plan are outdated and believe FWP should clearly identify areas important to connectivity.
- Believe recreational opportunities should not be limited by the potential presence of grizzly bears outside of any recovery Ecosystem.
- Believe windmill and solar farms are a threat to available suitable grizzly bear habitat and connectivity.
- Believe FWP should outline specific criteria for response options to conflict involving grizzly bears.
- Believe grizzly bears are causing less access to recreationists and more issues on public land.

RESPONSE:

Definition of Connectivity

The definition of connectivity has been adjusted to include the following underlined text (page 10 of the FEIS, page 15 of the Plan):

Connectivity: The ability for animals from one population to interact physically with those from a different population. May also be referred to as “linkage.” In this document, the term “connectivity” is synonymous with the term “linkage” and a “connectivity zone” is synonymous with a “linkage zone.” “Genetic connectivity” refers to situations in which neighboring populations exchange individuals and gene flow is achieved through reproduction of immigrants (and their descendants). In grizzly bears, genetic connectivity is often achieved through dispersal movement by males, which typically involve longer distances than females, who can mate with females in the target population, in essence, moving genetic material between populations. “Demographic connectivity” refers to situations in which neighboring populations exchange individuals and immigrants (and their descendants) contribute significantly to population dynamics. In grizzly bears, demographic connectivity is best achieved by maintaining residency of females and males in the areas between sub-populations because female bears typically disperse shorter distances than males. Demographic connectivity can often be achieved by moving females. By default, demographic connectivity also achieves genetic connectivity (Costello 2020). Connectivity refers to the movement of individuals between grizzly bear populations. Connectivity areas alone would not contain large numbers of grizzly bears and are only used for dispersal or immigration/emigration between established populations. On page 16 of the Plan and page 11 of the FEIS we state: “Connectivity areas may, by definition, contain breeding aggregations of grizzly bears, although they are likely to be at lower densities than within areas we call ‘population cores’ or ‘population cornerstones.’” Connectivity areas include a large amount of working private lands and places where the human population is expanding, creating a greater potential for conflict, and thus may not be able to support an established population (page 23 of the Plan and page 15 of the FEIS). Although it may increase the likelihood of successful connectivity, non-conflict bears captured within Ecosystems may not be moved to connectivity areas outside the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” without additional MEPA analysis. Approved sites where grizzly bears can be released, as approved by the Fish and Wildlife Commission 2021-2026, are within the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” and can be found in Appendix G of the Plan or Appendix B of the FEIS. Updated maps (Figures 17 and 18 in the Plan) highlight connectivity pathways in western Montana.

Clarifying Intent: Connectivity and Translocation

Allowing for connectivity and promoting the ability of wildlife to move across the landscape is a fundamental conservation principle for maintaining all species in Montana. The ability of species to move also adds resiliency to populations so they can relocate as necessary in response to changing conditions.

FWP is committed to maintaining the viability of the grizzly bear population overall, including promoting connectivity between core areas where appropriate. FWP encourages and supports the natural recovery of grizzly bears. Natural

recovery of grizzly bears may take several years. In order to assist natural recovery and genetics between the species, FWP is opting to occasionally and thoughtfully translocate individuals (see Appendices I and J in the Plan).

The Plan recognizes the value and challenges of connectivity in statements such as the following:

...FWP recognizes the value of providing functional connectivity between population cores. Connectivity in this sense should not be interpreted as requiring one seamless group of animals stretched across the various population cores; instead, occasional migrants among the cores will suffice and these can be provided by a long-term average density of bears that is lower than the density in the population cores.

The following underlined text has been added to the Plan (pages 16 and 95) to demonstrate FWP is aware of what is needed for true connectivity:

In grizzly bears, demographic connectivity may be achieved through the residency of females and males in the areas between sub-populations because female bears typically disperse shorter distances than males. Demographic connectivity can often be achieved by moving females. By default, demographic connectivity also achieves genetic connectivity (Costello 2020).

The Plan and FEIS have also been amended to clarify that FWP is not planning to actively encourage the presence of bears in any one connectivity area. Rather, the focus is on proactively managing conflict and conserving habitat to facilitate bears moving safely on their own through these areas. The Plan (page 8) and FEIS (page 39) now state:

“FWP would not actively manage for grizzly bear presence between core areas, where the likelihood of conflict is high but would promote low density populations in between core areas for connectivity purposes.”

Existing language in the Plan clarifies that connectivity does not require that grizzly bears occupy the entire state, nor does the density of bears in between recovery zones need to match the density of bears within recovery zones.

The Plan (page 6 and 9) and FEIS (page 40) state:

FWP believes connectivity can be achieved by securing attractants (to help grizzly bears rely on natural, not anthropogenic, foods and avoid human contact) and in the case of the GYE, by occasional, thoughtful translocations for genetic exchange. It is believed these strategies together can bring connectivity between core populations to fruition.

While some commenters disagree entirely with the idea of human-assisted connectivity (i.e., periodically translocating a bear from one Ecosystem to another), others express concern that FWP will use translocation to avoid habitat conservation and conflict prevention work. The following underlined text has been added to the Plan to address concerns related to periodic translocation and connectivity:

Translocation for genetic exchange is not a standalone strategy for connectivity as the conservation of habitat and the prevention of conflicts in between recovery zones are important components to ensure long-term connectivity.

FWP is committed to carrying out an array of conflict prevention programs, focusing on Ecosystem areas *and* areas important to connectivity.

The term “experimental” was copied from language within Appendix I, Pilot program: Genetic augmentation – GYE: “Translocated individuals would be considered experimental animals, and either moved or euthanized should they cause conflicts with humans.” Any bears translocated for genetic purposes would be treated within the guidelines of Conservation Strategies and would be moved or euthanized similarly to other bears that cause conflict with humans.

The Plan has not been edited to delete the word “experimental” but to be clear, the use of the word does not imply a different decision-making process for dealing with conflict. The following underlined language has been added to the statement in the Plan (pages 114 and 232) and FEIS (page 198): “Translocated individuals would be considered experimental animals, and either moved or euthanized should they cause conflicts with humans” [similar to how any other grizzly bear will be managed.]

The idea of potentially increasing the mortality limit for the specific gender of any animal translocated from the NCDE to the GYE after one year of the bears survival was copied over from language within Appendix I, Pilot program: Genetic augmentation – GYE.

Clarifying Intent: Proactive Removal of Conflict-Free Grizzly Bears

The Plan is clear that in areas where grizzly bear expansion does not contribute to connectivity, FWP would have a lower tolerance for grizzly bears involved in conflicts. The following underlined text has been added to clarify the direction on removal of grizzly bears (page 9 of the Plan and page 40 of FEIS):

Grizzly bears will not be proactively removed on public or private lands outside of core habitats unless the bear is exhibiting human habituated and or dangerous behaviors and non-lethal efforts at harassment have been unsuccessful. FWP would use available discretion to remove or relocate grizzly bears involved in conflicts with humans, particularly in areas where connectivity among population cores is unlikely.

This statement explains the balance required to allow grizzly bears to move outside core areas while prioritizing coexistence and human safety, particularly in areas unlikely to support connectivity to other areas. Criteria on when lethal removal occurs as a result of conflict or human safety cannot be outlined because each scenario is different. However, lethal removal in relation to livestock depredation will occur in compliance with Senate Bill (“SB”) 295 and Administrative Rules of Montana (“ARMS”) 12.9.1404-1416 that were codified as a result of SB 295.

The following text has been edited in the Plan (pages 7 and 9), as well as the FEIS (page 40), to clarify that bears will not be proactively removed in connectivity areas if they are conflict free:

Because there are no cornerstone populations of grizzly bears in Central or Eastern Montana (nor does FWP envision a future in which there will be any), there is nothing with which to connect bears from the west. While grizzly bear presence would not be an objective in areas far from largely mountain habitats and in prairie habitats where agricultural development predominates, individual animals in these areas would be accepted to the degree they remain conflict-free.

Note: This statement previously read “could be accepted.”

The following section has been modified for increased transparency on page 112 of the Plan:

Moving non-conflict grizzly bears (captured outside RZs) whose origin is uncertain

FWP’s Preferred Alternative would allow managers to relocate such bears to release sites considered to provide the best chance for the bear to avoid future conflict, even if that site were not within the animal’s presumed or known population core of origin, as long as the site had previously been approved by the Commission and was included within the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears.” Thus, the Preferred Alternative envisions increased application of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” boundaries to management decisions. Whereas estimated occupied range maps are now analyzed primarily to document changes in occupied range over time, the resulting maps would also be used to determine whether or not specific release sites could be used in situations such as envisioned here.

It is thus appropriate to clarify how the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” maps are (and would continue to be) produced. Following Bjornlie et al (2014a:183), Costello et al. (2023), Dellinger et al. (2023), and

Kasworm et al. (2023), the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” maps are produced by applying zonal analysis and ordinary kriging to 3 km² cells with verified grizzly bear locations documented during a 15-year window (20-years for CYE) up to the current year. Verified locations used to determine occupancy of cells are collected from GPS transmitters; VHF telemetry flights; capture and mortality locations; human-grizzly bear conflict sites; verified observations (sightings or tracks) or remote camera photos confirmed by agency personnel; and opportunistic samples of grizzly bear hair, blood, scat, or tissue confirmed by DNA analysis. GPS data are screened to exclude all but one randomly selected location per bear per day. This ensures that GPS data are not overrepresented in the data set and are appropriately scaled to the daily activity radius used to determine grid cell size. Data involving unusual single-track temporary excursions, made by relocated or other collared bears, may also be screened if they unduly distort the extent of occupied range. The method is unaffected by the intensity of location points within cells but is influenced instead by the number of neighboring cells with locations points.

The algorithm developed by Bjornlie et al. (2014a) was designed to provide the “most parsimonious balance of inclusion and exclusion of low-density peripheral locations [while allowing]...for annual updates of grizzly bear distribution....” FWP finds it a good choice when the objective is to identify a boundary that distinguishes where grizzly bears have established residency, as opposed to areas where bears have made occasional forays or areas with low-density peripheral locations. Note that the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” map is deliberately not as inclusive as USFWS’s “may be present” concept (Figure 4), which is an estimate of the larger area over which grizzly bears have been observed to occur.

Costello, CM, LL Roberts, and MA Vinks. 2023. Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Monitoring Team Annual Report, 2022. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell, Montana, USA.

Dellinger, JA, BE Karabensh, and MA Haroldson. 2023. Grizzly bear occupied range in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, 2008-2022 in FT van Manen, MA Haroldson, and BE Karabensh, editors. Yellowstone grizzly bear investigations: annual report of the Interagency grizzly Bear Study Team, 2022. U.S. Geological Survey, Bozeman, Montana, USA.

Kasworm, WF, TG Radandt, JE Teisberg, T Vent, M Proctor, H Cooley and JK Fortin- Noreus. 2023. Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear recovery area 2022 research and monitoring progress report. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Missoula, Montana.

Conflict Prevention and Guidance from the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council relative to Connectivity

FWP takes very seriously the recommendations of the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council ("GBAC"). With respect to managing grizzly bears in connectivity areas, the GBAC recommended:

- Recommendation 2. The identification of areas between established recovery zones that best contribute to genetic and demographic connectivity is necessary to prioritize resource allocation, focus outreach and education efforts, build social tolerance, and proactively engage local communities and landowners.
- Recommendation 3. As expansion occurs outside the four recovery Ecosystems and the landscapes in-between them in Montana, FWP and relevant agencies will have to balance this expansion with the need to prioritize resources that support both public and private lands. This would include resources, personnel, and conflict prevention/ mitigation strategies well ahead of grizzly bear expansion into unprepared areas.

Accordingly, the preferred alternative prioritizes: (1) bear manager FTE funding where expanding populations present the need for conflict management and opportunities for connectivity while maintaining such efforts in occupied core areas; and, (2) information, outreach, and communication work where expanding populations present the need for conflict management and opportunities for connectivity while maintaining such efforts in occupied core areas.

As expected, FWP and partners have been and will continue to remain active in conflict management and prevention efforts throughout the core Ecosystems. One example of conflict management and prevention efforts is FWP's heavy emphasis on reducing unsecured attractants to mitigate human-bear conflicts—and the potential mortality of dispersing bears—wherever grizzly bear presence is new to residents and where grizzlies are well established and known to occur. However, FWP is also taking efforts to increase transparency and public awareness of grizzly bears in connectivity areas. Recently, FWP hired bear management specialists in the connectivity areas of Anaconda, Conrad, and Hamilton. FWP bear specialists regularly visit outlying communities where grizzly presence is new to enable coexistence between bears and humans.

While FWP cannot point to exact future needs or resources to fund additional outreach and education efforts, it is nonetheless committed to continue building the program where necessary. FWP will make all reasonable efforts to implement actions that minimize bear removal. However, even with the increased focus on outreach and education in areas outside of core areas, sometimes a need will emerge to remove grizzly bears that cause conflict(s). As grizzly bear presence expands or additional conflict reduction work in core, occupied, and/or connectivity areas is needed, FWP may create new FTE positions. This committed level of staffing may assist in achieving legal recovery in certain Ecosystems. FWP's on-the-ground communication and work is aimed at directly facilitating grizzly bear connectivity between Ecosystems.

Habitat Conservation Between Ecosystems

As described in the FEIS, more than 21 million acres in the 30-county project area are already protected to some degree by state or federal designation (e.g., national forest, wildlife refuge, park, or wilderness).

Additionally, conservation easements or leases held by FWP and others, which stipulate enforceable stewardship responsibilities, offer ancillary grizzly bear habitat protections.

FWP, for instance, manages 339,255 acres under public ownership as Wildlife Management Areas ("WMA") outside of and between the recovery Ecosystems (within the 30-county project area). FWP also partners in the stewardship of 391,204 acres held in conservation easements outside of and between the recovery Ecosystems (within the 30-county project area). Figure 8 in the FEIS and Figure 10 in the Plan depicts state and federal protected land acreage within the 30-county project area and Table 2 in the FEIS and Table 5 in the Plan quantifies the breakdown of acreage by agency. These protected lands facilitate grizzly bears moving outside the protected Ecosystems. In addition, FWP and partners are committed to conserving additional habitat to protect grizzly bears and connectivity habitats as opportunities arise.

Reducing Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions to Promote Safe Passage Between Ecosystems

FWP is a partner to the Montana Wildlife and Transportation Partnership ("MWTP"), which includes the Montana Department of Transportation ("MDT") and Montanans for Safe Wildlife Passage.

The partnership, formed in 2019, focuses on reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions by developing ways to accommodate wildlife movement across highways. The partnership designed a planning tool to assist stakeholders in identifying areas of need to focus resources and expertise for further analysis and aids in developing project-level recommendations. As a result, MWTP establishes a way for public-private partnerships to propose and carry out wildlife accommodation projects across Montana's highways. Communities and their partners can apply for funds to establish stand-alone wildlife accommodation projects within the state's highway infrastructure. These efforts to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions will benefit grizzly bears as structures designed to aid ungulates crossing highways can be fashioned to encourage use by bears.

An additional example of FWP's contribution to an active effort to accommodate safer wildlife movement is underway. It focuses on wildlife moving to and from the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and Glacier National Park, which form

one of the largest protected areas in the continental United States. Straddling the Continental Divide, these two areas likewise include a vital linkage between vast areas of public land to the south toward Yellowstone National Park.

Grizzly Bear Hunting and Other Recreation in Areas Important to Connectivity

FWP recognizes the many firmly held views regarding the advantages and disadvantages of hunting grizzly bears, including those of Tribal Nations.

Any hunting season structure approved by the Fish and Wildlife Commission (“Commission”) would be designed to maintain connectivity as a priority. Conversely, a hunt could be similarly designed to curb grizzly bear expansion where core connectivity is unlikely, particularly in Central and Eastern Montana. By no means would grizzly bear hunting seasons be designed to compromise recovered populations or existing connectivity-area priorities.

It is important to note that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (“USFWS”) will monitor state activity for five years post-delisting. With that in mind, any grizzly bear hunt season structure approved by the Commission would consider the need to regulate harvest to maintain core grizzly bear populations at recovery levels. Between core populations, FWP will manage to minimize conflicts, through education and habitat conservation, to facilitate connectivity between Ecosystems, consistent with multi-agency commitments in the Conservation Strategies. FWP has adopted grizzly bear ARMs, as required by Senate Bill 295 (Montana 2023 Legislature). The ARMs include FWP’s commitment to prohibiting a grizzly bear hunting season for at least five-years post delisting.

Additionally, to help increase FWP’s understanding of tribal cultural concerns, FWP is committed to consulting with the Blackfoot Tribe, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and other tribal authorities well before developing grizzly bear hunting recommendations in attempts to resolve objections to hunts near reservation boundaries or other areas deemed important by tribal entities.

Non-consumptive recreation would not be limited by the potential presence of grizzly bears outside of any recovery Ecosystem. Some individuals may avoid recreating in certain areas out of fear of grizzly bear presence or occupancy.

Trapping or hunting of other species in certain areas may cause concern for some. For example, the use of snares for wolf trapping and the use of hounds for hunting black bears within connectivity areas may result in incidental grizzly bear captures and or mortality. Incidental captures involving grizzly bears are documented and publicly reported. Additional mechanisms may be used to minimize incidental captures and mortalities. For wolves, this includes rigorous tracking of harvest through mandatory harvest reporting and a 24-hour closure notice process. The Commission also adopted a set of regulatory components to reduce human safety concerns, reduce risk of overharvest, and reduce probability for take of federally protected lynx and grizzly bears. These mechanisms have been put in place to ensure other species are not impacted as a result of the wolf regulations. Additionally, the Commission can adjust seasons annually, regionally, and on short notice to address harvest rate and population trajectory or concerns to species like lynx or grizzly bears. See page 132 of the Plan.

Land Management in Connectivity Areas

Decisions for lands managed by entities other than FWP are outside the scope of this plan. However, FWP works to ensure habitat requirements for grizzly bears, as well as the public’s recreational activities, are considered through its involvement with NCDE, GYE, CYE, and BE subcommittees, and through participation in recurring federal and state land-management plan revisions. FWP abides to the commitments outlined in statutes, ARMs, litigation decisions, and federal laws. Suggested changes in state or federal statutes that have not yet been adopted, such as United States Senate Bill 1576 or 1276, will not be followed unless and until they are adopted. In either event, comments relating to current state or federal statutes or amendments to those statutes are outside of the scope of this plan.

Public land managers are committed to various grizzly bear recovery assurances through enforceable instruments, such as National Forest Plans, Conservation Strategies, and Habitat Conservation Plans, all of which are referenced

in the Plan, when considering various land use. FWP would consider grizzly bear presence in all recreation planning and decisions on FWP lands, and FWP would consider grizzly bear presence when providing feedback on other public land management decisions related to recreation. FWP would also consider grizzly bear presence in MEPA and NEPA processes for evaluating environmental impacts of various land use and extraction activities such as mining, windfarms, and solar farms.

Moreover, FWP would continue or expand its unique program of educating recreationists, including hunters, about recreating safely in grizzly bear country. FWP and recent social research (Nesbitt et al. 2020) shows that 57 percent of Montanans disagree that grizzly bears limit their recreational opportunities. That same research shows that 23 percent of Montanans agree or strongly agree that grizzly bears limit their recreational opportunities. Thus, addressing recreational expectations among Montanans presents FWP and other agencies with a delicate balance. There is an expectation to: (1) provide secure areas for grizzly bears; (2) allow grizzly bears to expand into biologically suitable and socially acceptable areas; (3) maintain existing resource management and recreational uses; and (4) allow agencies to respond to recreation issues with appropriate management actions.

Recreationists in Montana have largely unhindered access to millions of acres of undeveloped land. Some of this land is currently, or based on distribution trends, will be, occupied by grizzly bears. As grizzly bear numbers and distribution increase and the number of outdoor recreationists grow, contact and interactions between recreationists and grizzly bears will likely rise. The GBAC recognized this when it suggested that growing recreational use on public lands is an emerging challenge to grizzly bear management that could negatively affect grizzly bear recovery. Given the above-mentioned social research, FWP does not believe grizzly bears are causing less access to recreationists and/or more issues on public land in a significant way. However, FWP will monitor issues as they arise. As the plan notes, FWP will continue to provide comprehensive education and outreach activities. For recreationists, this would encompass messaging around the use and effectiveness of bear spray and training programs to include bear identification and safety offerings via media sources. If needed, areas of public land may close to recreation as a result of a grizzly bear involved in human-conflict or due to a significant increase in grizzly bear activity.

Consistent with the Plan, and as suggested by the GBAC, FWP would continue to work on consistent food storage requirements across state and federal land in partnership with others. Considerations would encourage smaller group sizes for public and special event use in recovery Ecosystems. FWP might also join other agencies in encouraging temporary trail closures, and limiting special use permits in areas with critical habitat conditions during appropriate times of the year.

In all, FWP could consider future areas of connectivity in land management decisions and advocate or require that commercial or special use permit applications include specific plans to meet food storage order regulations. The aim would always be to manage and reduce conflicts, contain attractants, and minimize impacts to grizzly bear habitat and food resources. FWP would similarly consider identifying areas of Montana with minimal impacts to grizzly bear habitat and minimal risk of conflict to prepare for participation in recreation planning processes proactively. This would ensure appropriate and timely examination of new and proposed recreation activities in designated core grizzly bear habitat and connectivity areas on public lands and move or reroute activities as suggested by a multi-agency analysis.

Hunting Grizzly Bears

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Want grizzly bears to remain protected and listed on the Endangered Species Act (“ESA”), and believe they are not recovered.
- Want grizzly bears to be removed (*i.e.*, delisted) from the ESA, and believe they are recovered.
- Want protection/delisting to apply to the contiguous lower 48 states, and management of grizzly bears to be from that perspective.

- Disagree with the comparison of grizzly bear hunting to deer and elk hunting, asserting that grizzly bear hunting is trophy hunting (*i.e.*, only the head and hide have value). Some suggest grizzly bear meat is inedible based on the prevalence of the parasite *Trichinella*. Further, some suggest hunters would be most interested in keeping the head and hide of a harvested grizzly bear and would likely discard the meat.
- Disagree with the prospect of an auctioned sale of a grizzly bear hunting license suggesting such a hunt would be a trophy hunt available only to those with significant financial means. These reviewers further suggest that the value of revenue acquired via an auctioned grizzly bear license would not outweigh the opposition to such an offering. Other reviewers fully support the sale of tags and an auction to provide funding to the agency for grizzly bear management.
- Disagree that the potential sale of hunting licenses would generate an economic benefit to FWP.
- Disagree with the prospect of grizzly bear hunting within a "connectivity area," suggesting a hunt in any grizzly bear connectivity-area should not be pursued.
- Disagree with the prospect of grizzly bear hunting on the edge of national parks.
- Disagree with aspects of the hypothetical hunting structures described within the plan, which some suggest include hunting grizzly bears in groups and hunting bears in dens.
- Disagree with the notion that a grizzly bear hunting season will build support for grizzly bears among private landowners.
- Disagree with the notion that a grizzly bear hunt will reduce human-bear conflicts and believe we should reduce the frequency of conflict prior to the establishment of a hunt.
- Agree with the notion that a grizzly bear hunt will reduce human-bear conflicts.
- Disagree with a hunt that could take place immediately after the grizzly bear is removed from the ESA.
- Disagree with the notion that hunting is a necessary component of grizzly bear management.
- Agree with the notion that hunting is a necessary component of grizzly bear management.
- Suggest grizzly bears are culturally significant animals to Montana Indian Tribes and, as a result, should not be hunted.
- Fully support a grizzly bear hunt to include some who believe hunting should be unlimited in the areas outside designated Ecosystems.
- Fully support a grizzly bear hunt aggressive enough to reduce the current population and expansion.
- Some reviewers disagree with the statement that a grizzly bear hunting season will result in increased tolerance for the species.
- Believe a grizzly bear hunt will have positive influences on ungulate populations.
- Do not want the hunting of dens.
- Believe human dimensions surveys are insufficient and believe a ballot initiative to ascertain public's viewpoint of whether grizzlies should be hunted should occur.

RESPONSE:

[Listing/Delisting of Grizzly Bears](#)

Listing or delisting any species on the ESA is under the authority and discretion of the USFWS. The USFWS determines whether a distinct population segment ("DPS") or the population as a whole has met recovery criteria and if a grizzly bear population is delisted. If the USFWS was to determine a DPS or the population met recovery criteria and should be delisted, the DPS or population will fall under state authority and management once the rule/regulation is finalized and adopted in the Federal Register. Comments related to the continued listing or delisting of grizzly bears at any spatial scale, in relation to the ESA, are outside of the scope of the 2024 Grizzly Bear Management Plan (the "Plan").

Documents that guided the development of the plan (the GYE Conservation Strategy ("CS") documents and cross-references FWP's Grizzly Bear Management Plan for Southwest Montana; the NCDE CS documents and cross-references FWP's Grizzly Bear Management Plan for Western Montana) include Memoranda of Understanding ("MOU") between impacted federal, state, and tribal parties to include USFWS, FWP, Department of Natural

Resources and Conservation (NCDE CS only), Bureau of Land Management, United States Forest Service ("USFS"), National Park Service, United States Department of Agriculture ("USDA") Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service (NCDE CS only), Wyoming Game and Fish Dept (GYE CS only), Idaho Department of Fish and Game (GYE only), Bureau of Indian Affairs (NCDE CS only), Blackfeet Nation (NCDE CS only), and Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes (NCDE CS only). Under the MOUs, each agency agrees to use their authorities to implement the measures for conservation, monitoring, and cooperation, while respecting statutory responsibilities that differ among each signatory. As such, interagency collaboration will occur regarding grizzly bear management in Montana and will thus extend outside of state boundaries.

Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission Process

Montana FWP prepares recommendations for Commission action based on guidance provided by management plans, such as this document, as well as scientific studies and expert opinion. The plan provides the foundation for future FWP recommendations and management actions regarding the conservation and management of grizzly bears at the state level, although it is not a compendium of all relevant aspects of grizzly bear conservation or management in Montana. Detail on an array of decisions and commitments are contained in existing plans and agreements referenced and reviewed in this plan. Adopting this plan will serve to recommit FWP to existing documents to which it is a party.

The existing FWP plans for grizzly bear conservation and management crafted for Western Montana (2006) and Southwest Montana (2013) indicate that long-term goals include limited, regulated hunting. FWP created a hunting structure in 2017 as a prerequisite of delisting the GYE DPS. The USFWS required Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho to propose hunting regulations they could point to as adequate regulatory mechanisms to ensure that hunting would not jeopardize a (future) delisted population.

The hunting structure developed in 2017, which was presented to the then acting Commission, included the following guiding principles for a grizzly bear hunt:

- Maintain a viable grizzly bear population in the Montana portion of the GYE under state management;
- Increase broad public acceptance of sustainable harvest and hunter opportunity as an effective part of successful, long-term grizzly bear conservation; and
- Maintain positive and effective working relationships with stakeholders.

Upon FWP's recommendation, however, the Commission delayed the adoption of a proposed hunt. The delay was soon rendered moot by litigation that suspended the USFWS' delisting rule when the court determined that the USFWS did not consider impacts of delisting the GYE DPS on grizzly bear populations outside of the DPS. FWP has adopted grizzly bear ARMs, as required by Senate Bill 295. The adoptions include FWP's commitment to prohibiting a grizzly bear hunting season/harvest season for at least five-years post delisting.

FWP included the Commissions 2017 guiding principles (noted above) in the Plan because they were previously adopted by the Commission. Possible hunting structures are provided in this plan to provide a range of ideas for consideration to show how a grizzly bear hunt might be implemented following a delisting decision. Because the Commission will decide any and all sideboards of a grizzly bear hunt, comments submitted on hunting season structure specifics are outside of the scope of the Plan.

Hunting Season

One hypothetical hunting season structure, entitled "population growth reduction," elicited concern among some reviewers who objected to the appearance of abandoned fair-chase principles. In fact, two vital conservation and management points were inadvertently missing from the discussion. The Plan now states explicitly:

- Taking of any bear in a group would be prohibited; and,

- Taking of a bear in a den would be prohibited.

Furthermore, the Plan relies heavily on Montana law for guidance. By law, the Commission would develop detailed regulations to govern any grizzly bear hunting season. Any hunting of grizzly bears would occur under comprehensive rules and regulations adopted by the Commission through a public process. The law states:

“[t]he commission: (a) shall set the policies for the protection, preservation, management, and propagation of the wildlife, fish, game, furbearers, waterfowl, nongame species, and endangered species of the state and for the fulfillment of all other responsibilities of the department related to fish and wildlife as provided by law; (b) shall establish the hunting, fishing, and trapping rules of the department.” (§ 87-1-301, MCA).

Specific hunting-season details—such as the extent of hunting permissible within connectivity areas or the status of hunting around national parks—must be acted on by the Commission following a required and well-publicized public process. In short, prior to either of those instances occurring, the Commission must allow public participation and public comment throughout the Commission’s decision-making process.

Any realistic future grizzly bear hunting season scenario would be small in scale, and FWP’s approach would remain similar to its current approach to managing the species. Hunting would be added to FWP’s grizzly bear conservation toolbox but would not dominate management actions or recommendations. FWP anticipates that most of its attention and resources would continue to be spent on conflict reduction and, under the Preferred Alternative – Alternative 2, attending to interconnected population objectives compatible with human safety priorities and reducing disruptions to Montanans’ lives and livelihoods.

Possible hunting season-structures are provided in this Plan to explain a range of ideas for consideration, and to show how a grizzly bear hunt might be implemented following a delisting decision. Because the Commission will decide any and all sideboards of a grizzly bear hunt, comments submitted on hunting season structure specifics are outside of the scope of the Plan.

Commission adoption of specific hunting season details, including when a season would begin, would sequentially follow public input using the mandatory public process, after which a Commission would address any FWP recommendations. Any grizzly bear hunting proposal would comply with this process, including proposals for a hunting season structure, season dates, hunting district boundaries, and all other aspects of a Montana hunting season. As part of the season-setting process, FWP routinely conducts public scoping to gain insight into the public’s concerns about any Montana hunting and trapping season. FWP consider these scoping comments, other communications, and survey and harvest data to craft proposals for season recommendations.

Once proposals are presented to the Commission, the Commission may reject, modify, or approve the recommendations. Once approved, the final proposal becomes regulation.

Hunting License Cost-Benefit

Currently, Montana primarily funds most conservation of game animals using dollars raised through the sale of hunting and fishing licenses that are matched with federal excise taxes on shooting equipment.

FWP does not expect a potential sale of post-delisting grizzly bear hunting licenses to produce a revenue stream sufficient to cover all grizzly bear management actions; FWP commonly spends more on individual species than license sales for that species may generate. FWP would expect the financial cost of conservation and management actions to exceed any such revenue for the foreseeable future.

The prospect of FWP offering the sale of a single, high-priced permit via an auction is an admittedly controversial issue. A single-sale permit could generate additional revenue that could fund grizzly bear conservation and

management more substantively. FWP recognizes that negative public opinions on offering a grizzly bear hunting permit through an auction sale similar to what currently exists for bighorn sheep, mountain goat, moose, elk, and mule deer, could influence public support for alternative funding mechanisms and the FWP grizzly bear management program.

Montana first protected the grizzly bear from indiscriminate take in 1923 by designating it a game animal. Should the grizzly bear become delisted, and if a hunting season is authorized, significant discretion remains on how to best define the objectives, geographic scope, and constraints that would govern such a hunt. The Commission would make such decisions in a separate public process that would respect Montana law and the conservation objectives in the Plan.

Public Opinion on Hunting Grizzly Bears

Some disagreed with the notion that hunting is a necessary component of grizzly bear management. Hunting of wildlife is a recreational opportunity that the Commission may make available to those interested in participating. It is also the statutorily mandated responsibility of FWP to provide harvest opportunities (i.e., hunting/trapping) of game and furbearer species to the public, as part of Montana's heritage (§ 87-1-107, MCA).

While some reviewers expressed opposition to a post-delisting grizzly bear hunt, recent public surveys show support for carefully considered hunting proposals. For instance, results from a 2020 survey of Montanans regarding grizzly bear management in Montana (Costello et al. 2020) found a sizable majority of Montanans supported some form of potential grizzly bear hunting:

- 49 percent supported enough hunting to manage grizzly bear population size;
- 30 percent supported a very limited season that does not affect their population size; and,
- 4 percent supported as much grizzly bear hunting as possible.

A smaller number of respondents expressed opposition to any form of potential grizzly bear hunting:

- 17 percent said grizzly bears should never be hunted in Montana.

A majority (61 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that people should have the opportunity to hunt grizzly bears as long as populations can withstand the pressure, whereas 24 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with this notion.

Views were more mixed for other questions related to hunting grizzly bears:

- When asked if hunting should be used as a tool to reduce conflict, 46 percent agreed or strongly agreed, and 36 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- When asked if hunting would make grizzly bears more wary of humans, 39 percent agreed or strongly agreed, while 32 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.
- Some commenters questioned the legitimacy of statements about public support for hunting.

These surveys have been conducted using broadly accepted scientific survey methodologies (Dillman et al. 2014 and Vaske 2019) that include efforts to quantify potential non-response bias (Haziza and Lesage 2016) and ensure results are representative of all Montanans' views. These methodologies have evolved over time to improve the

overall survey strategy, data analysis, and weighting procedures¹ to ensure the results are representative of all Montanans. As such, FWP believes these surveys are sufficient. Some reviewers believed a ballot initiative was necessary to ascertain the public's viewpoint of whether grizzlies should be hunted. The above-mentioned survey's do not consider Montanans' views of a ballot initiative. Regardless, the Commission has statutory authority to set hunting seasons.

Trophy Hunt and Waste of Game

In response to public comment regarding whether a grizzly bear hunt would be a trophy hunt, FWP amended the Plan to read as follows:

- *Montana statutes and rules do not define "trophy" hunting. Similarly, this document does not use the term. Section 87-2-701, MCA, however states that grizzly bear hunters must purchase a "trophy" license to possess and transport a harvested animal. The harvest is cited as an undefined trophy in the law, ostensibly to deter poaching and establish accurate harvest data. Because the grizzly bear is classified as a game animal, any hunter who harvests a grizzly bear would be prohibited from wasting edible meat.*

¹ Battaglia, M., D. Dillman, M. Frankel, R. Harter, T. Buskirk, C. McPhee, J. DeMatteis, and T. Yancy. 2016. Sampling, Data Collection, and Weighting Procedures for Address-Based Sample Surveys. *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology* 4:476-500.

Berglund, P., and S. Heeringa. 2014. *Multiple Imputation of Missing Data Using SAS*. Cary, N.C.: SAS Institute Inc.

Dillman, D. A., J. D. Smyth, and L. M. Christian. 2014. *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method*. John Wiley & Sons.

Haziza, D., and J. F. Beaumont. 2017. Construction of Weights in Surveys: A Review. *Statistical Science* 32:206-226.

Haziza, D., and E. Lesage. 2016. A discussion of weighting procedures for unit nonresponse. *Journal of Official Statistics* 32:129-145.

Kalton, G., and I. Flores-Cervantes. 2003. Weighting methods. *Journal of Official Statistics* 19:81-97.

Kish, L., and M. Frankel. 1974. Inference from Complex Samples. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series B (methodological)*, 1-37.

Lavallee, P., and J. F. Beaumont. 2016. Weighting Principals and Practicalities. In C. Wolf, D. Joye, T. Smith, & Y.-C. Fu, *The Sage Handbook of Survey Methodology* (pp. 460-476). Sage.

Rubin, D. B. 1987. *Multiple Imputation for Nonresponse in Surveys*. New York, N.Y.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Sarndal, C. E. 2007. The calibration approach in survey theory and practice. *Survey Methodology* 39:99-119.

Valliant, R., and J. A. Dever. 2018. *Survey Weights: A Step-by-Step Guide to Calculation*. College Station, TX: Stata Press.

Valliant, R., J. A. Dever, and F. Kreuter. 2013. *Practical Tools for Designing and Weighting Surveys*. New York, New York: Springer.

Vaske, J. J. 2019. *Survey research and analysis*. Sagamore-Venture. 1807 North Federal Drive, Urbana, IL 61801.

The comparison of linking a grizzly bear hunt to elk or deer hunting has been deleted (see track change documents _ version A).

In Montana, game animals are defined as “deer, elk, moose, antelope, caribou, mountain sheep, mountain goat, mountain lion, bear, and wild buffalo.” § 87-2-101(4), MCA. The Commission could consider and adopt hunting regulations for grizzly bears as game animals.

FWP is cognizant that grizzly bears carry *Trichinella*. This roundworm parasite causes trichinosis, a disease people can get by eating raw or undercooked meat from animals infected with the microscopic organism. Language specific to *Trichinella* is included in Montana’s black bear hunting regulations. Similar language could inform a Commission’s decision(s) on grizzly bear hunting regulations. The black bear regulations state:

- “*Trichinella* is a parasite of mammals and some birds. Immature parasites develop cysts in the muscle of the host animal and are transmitted to a new host when infected meat is eaten raw or undercooked. Wild animals rarely show signs of infection. Humans and domestic dogs or cats can become infected with *Trichinella* by consuming raw or undercooked meat from an infected animal. Symptoms of infection vary and may be severe. All bear and mountain lion meat should be treated as if it were infected. Freezing will not kill the organism; however, cooking at temperatures above 165 degrees Fahrenheit will kill the parasite. Many processing techniques (jerky and smoked meats) may not reach the proper temperature. FWP recommends that all mountain lion and bear meat be well cooked to an internal temperature of 165 degrees before consumption by humans or pets.” Only upon a positive finding for *Trichinella*, or some other Department determination rendering the meat unfit for human consumption, can black bear meat be abandoned or discarded.

Grizzly Bears Culturally Significant to Native Americans

The grizzly bear became the state animal of Montana in 1983. But 40 years as Montana’s state animal is no match for the cultural heritage and spiritual connection shared among indigenous peoples who have lived with and revered grizzly bears for thousands of years.

FWP deeply respects the cultural significance grizzly bears represent among indigenous peoples. The Blackfoot Tribe and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (“CSKT”) continue to hold essential roles in Montana grizzly bear conservation and management in cooperation with FWP and several federal agencies.

FWP is honored to continue its long-standing relationship with the Blackfoot and CSKT and holds in high regard their traditional knowledge that informs management and sovereign lands that provide habitat for grizzly bears in Montana. FWP appreciates that many Native American Tribes consider grizzly bears sacred and recognizes that some tribes oppose hunting as a form of management.

To help increase FWP’s understanding of tribes’ cultural concerns, FWP is committed to working with Blackfoot and CSKT authorities and the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council before developing grizzly bear hunting recommendations to best avoid objections about hunts near reservation boundaries or other areas of cultural significance. Similarly, FWP will also collaborate with Tribal Nations to promote natural connectivity, minimize conflict, and to understand how lethal removals will be addressed on sovereign lands.

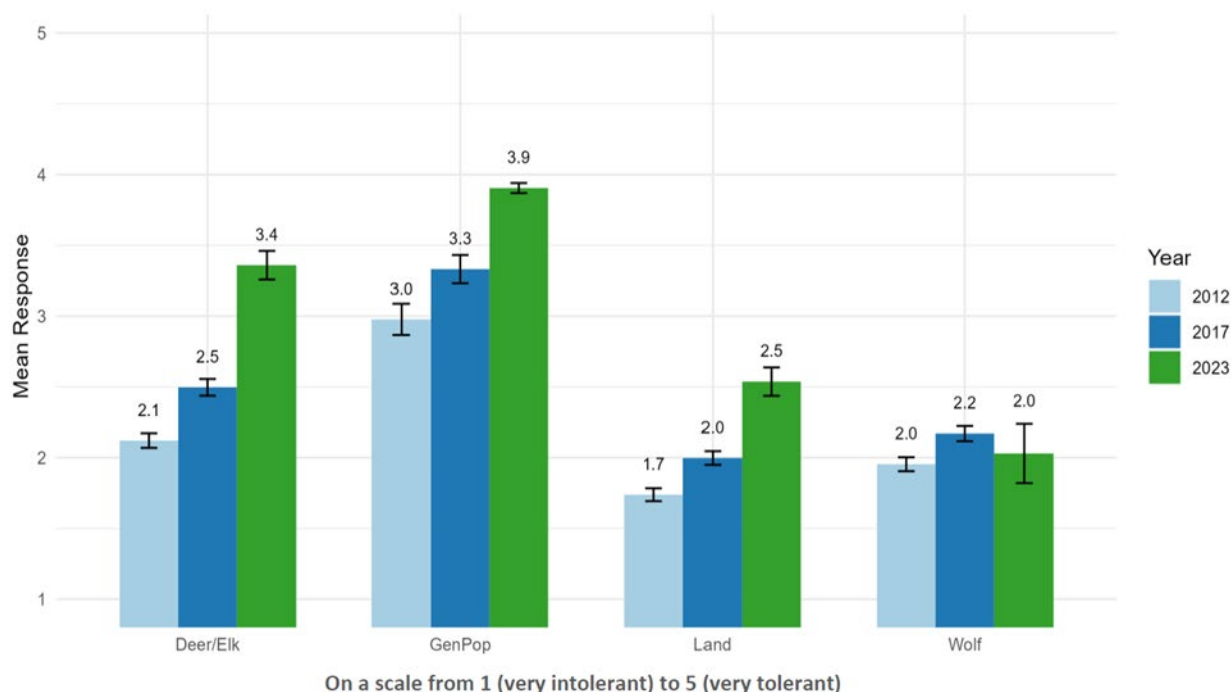
Increased Tolerance for Grizzly Bears Following Implementation of a Hunting Season

Some reviewers disagree with the statement that a grizzly bear hunting season will result in increased tolerance for the species. Reviewer objections focused on the draft plan’s summarized data that suggested a wolf hunt increased social tolerance among Montana’s rural landowners and did not agree that the same would occur for grizzly bears (*i.e.*, increased social tolerance following a post-delisting grizzly bear hunt). The draft plan cited the results of Lewis et al. (2012) as “*indirect evidence*” showing that “*tolerance for having wolves*” on Montana’s landscape was low as of

2012 but that “dissatisfaction” generally had decreased following the 2011 wolf hunt. A more recent perspective supporting the potential for harvests supporting tolerance for a species was provided by Richardson (2023). A variety of actions and activities may result in increased support depending on individual perceptions.

In addition to the wolf survey data from 2012, FWP has data from an FWP wolf survey completed in 2017 and 2023. The 2023 wolf survey shows that tolerance of wolves being on the Montana landscape has increased over time. (Metcalf et al. 2024; <https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/conservation/wolf/final-hd-research-summary-no-56-wolves.pdf>). The figure demonstrating that finding has been added to the Plan and FEIS to support FWP’s opinion that hunting grizzly bears may increase the public’s social tolerance of them being on the landscape.

Figure 6 (FEIS) and 23 (plan). Response to...“ On a scale from 1 (very intolerant) to 5 (very tolerant), how tolerant are you with wolves being on the Montana landscape?”.



While these findings cannot tie the hunting of grizzly bears directly to increased public tolerance, the findings do suggest the activities are likely important factors in tempering intolerance of wolves that inhabit Montana. A 2020 survey of Montanans found that a sizable majority of Montanans support some form of potential grizzly bear hunting (Costello et al., 2020). The study shows:

- 49 percent support enough hunting to manage the grizzly bear population size;
- 30 percent support a very limited season that does not affect their population size; and,
- 4 percent support as much grizzly bear hunting as possible.

Meanwhile, that same survey found that 17 percent responded that grizzly bears should never be hunted in Montana. The sizable majority of Montanans supporting the potential for a grizzly bear hunt demonstrates that a grizzly bear hunt may assist with increasing public tolerance of grizzly bears on the landscape.

Additionally, a 2022 survey of Montana residents (Nesbitt et al. 2023) shows that respondents who believed hunting should be used to manage conflict, were themselves older hunters, had some experience with wildlife-caused property damage, and believed grizzly bear populations were too high and expanding.

Regardless of the above, FWP has a long history of working with landowners and hunters to address complex wildlife-related conflicts. Through FWP endorsed work groups like the Private Land/Public Wildlife Council and established offerings like Block Management, Game Damage Assistance, and Livestock Loss Reimbursement programs, experience suggests that wildlife tolerance among many landowners is linked with hunting.

Hunting Grizzly Bears Will Not Reduce Human-Bear Conflicts

FWP believes a post-delisting grizzly bear hunt will be one of many important tools available to address conflicts on private land. FWP's judicious use of hunting in conflict situations is a part of, not separate from, FWP's comprehensive stewardship and commitment to Montana's thriving grizzly bear populations.

FWP's grizzly bear conservation and management tools, which are detailed in existing plans, strategies, and agreements referenced and reviewed in this plan, are in no way limited to or solely dependent on one activity. This plan unambiguously embraces accepted and new non-lethal conflict prevention and reduction tools, responsive management assistance, outreach and education, and hunting. FWP believes that when considered together, the use of these conservation and management tools will lead to the increased public tolerance and understanding needed to maintain Montana's thriving grizzly populations. The following underlined language has been added to the plan (page 123) and FEIS (page 54) for emphasis: The GBAC stated that while hunting can be a useful tool in managing grizzly bear populations, it will not replace the need for conflict prevention.

Hunting Grizzly Bears May Not Significantly Impact Ungulate Populations

Predator densities and diversity may influence prey abundances and distributions, of any potential population (including that of invasive or domestic species). Because grizzly bears prey on ungulates, grizzly bear management and other species management are intertwined. Regulated hunting of grizzly bears will take place within the larger context of multi-species management programs, rather than the context of single species management, and, as such, grizzly bear population abundance and trends are monitored concurrently with those of prey populations to evaluate population objectives of both predator and prey species. [See: <https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwpc/conservation/deer/2023-mt-whitetail-deer-estimates.pdf>, <https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwpc/conservation/deer/2023-mt-mule-deer-estimates.pdf>, <https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwpc/conservation/elk/2023-montana-elk-counts.pdf>].

Land Management

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Expressed concern that land management decisions are not being made with grizzly bears in mind.
- Expressed concern that FWP does not adequately consider grizzly bears in management decisions on FWP lands.
- Expressed concern that FWP does not adequately protect habitat between ecosystems that will ensure demographic and genetic connectivity between populations.
- Expressed concern that FWP should be managing open road densities on state lands for <1mi/mi² with no net increase in total roads. Other reviewers believe too many road restrictions are in place in the interest of grizzly bear conservation.
- Expressed concern that FWP is not doing enough to increase the ability of grizzly bears to cross highways safely.
- Expressed concern that FWP and MDT should establish more wildlife crossing signs in estimated occupied range of grizzly bears.
- Disagree with the idea that grizzly bears have done poorly when in close proximity to humans as evidenced by the number of bears living on the working lands of the Rocky Mountain Front.
- Believe vehicle collisions are a significant cause of mortality and there is a need for corridors.

RESPONSE:

Grizzly bears are “conflict-prone.” There will never be a time when conflict with humans does not exist, especially as human and urban development expands into their range. Due to their need for large areas and as those bears live closer to people, they will likely have a higher probability of conflict potentially resulting in more human injury or death, property damage, and human-caused mortality of grizzly bears. There must be efforts in place to reduce human-bear conflicts and the negative results of those conflicts. These efforts by FWP and other natural resource management agencies are ongoing and involve capture and radio-marking or relocation, attractant storage, fencing or hazing, and lethal removal. Due to the dangerous nature of the animal, when livestock-conflict offenses are repeated or human safety is of concern, the individual may be euthanized. With these measures in place, FWP strives for conflict-free grizzly bears to remain on the landscape and within the population. Indeed, there are some individuals in close proximity to humans that do not cause conflict. Where possible, bear specialists monitor these bears to reduce conflict and respond when necessary.

While decisions for lands managed by entities other than FWP are outside the scope of this plan, FWP works to ensure grizzly bear habitat needs are considered through its involvement with the NCDE, GYE, CYE, and BE subcommittees. In addition, FWP works with federal and state land managers on revisions to the plans that guide their decisions on issues of concern such as motorized access, food storage requirements, and seasonal land closures. National forest plans, conservation strategies, and habitat conservation plans include enforceable commitments that promote secure grizzly bear populations. FWP will follow the advice of the GBAC in seeking and enforcing consistent food storage requirements across state and federal lands, and encouraging subdivisions to consider appropriate food storage requirements.

As described in the FEIS, more than 21 million acres in the 30-county project area are already protected to some degree by state or federal designation, e.g., national forest, wildlife refuge, park, or wilderness. Additionally, conservation easements or leases held by FWP and others, which stipulate enforceable stewardship responsibilities, offer ancillary grizzly bear habitat protections. FWP owns 339,255 acres of WMA lands outside of and between the recovery Ecosystems (within the 30-county project area). FWP also has 391,204 acres in FWP held Conservation Easements outside of and between the recovery Ecosystems (within the 30-county project area). These protected lands increase the ability of grizzly bears to move outside of the protected areas within the Ecosystems. FWP will consider grizzly bears, as well as their distribution and expansion, when managing those lands or when acquiring new Conservation Easements through internal and external discussions.

Stewardship Examples

FWP works with partners to identify high-priority habitat conservation needs for a variety of species. While project priorities are not always tied directly to grizzly bears, grizzly bear habitat is often protected within projects designed to benefit other species. Consider a 2018 program initiated by the U.S. Department of the Interior, *Secretarial Order 3362: Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors*, that aims to improve habitat and migration corridors in 11 western states for pronghorn, elk, and mule deer. One of Montana’s priority areas to benefit from SO3362 is the landscape between Kalispell and Libby. This area is the focus of habitat conservation easement agreements among FWP, other public agencies, NGOs, and private landowners. Priorities tied to a habitat conservation program like SO3362 may not specifically emphasize grizzly bear conservation, yet, conserving critical winter range and migration corridors for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose, also protects critical habitat for grizzly bears.

FWP’s Habitat Montana program has also conserved habitat for grizzly bears. The Commission and FWP, through ARM’s 12.9.508 and 12.9.509, are called to “establish a statewide wildlife habitat system which will conserve Montana’s wildlife resources and pass them intact to future generations” and to implement “habitat management systems that are compatible with and minimize conflicts between wildlife values and traditional agricultural, economic and cultural values.”

Early forerunners of Habitat Montana focused on establishing WMAs, or game ranges as they were once called, such as FWP's Blackfoot-Clearwater and Sun River properties. These areas are still protected today as deer and elk winter ranges, but they also provide grizzly bear habitat. Likely, half of FWP WMAs harbor grizzly bears at least part of the year. Habitat Montana's goal is to conserve high-valued wildlife habitat—including habitat on working lands, whether farmlands, ranchlands, or timberlands.

With the establishment of the Forest Legacy Program in Montana, in 2000, FWP broadened the scope of habitat conservation to include high-priority forest and timberlands at risk of conversion to other uses. The Forest Legacy Program is a conservation program administered by the USFS in partnership with state agencies to encourage the protection of privately owned forest lands through conservation easements or land purchases. Protection of private forests through the Forest Legacy Program maintains many benefits, including the conservation of critical habitat for numerous wildlife species, such as grizzly bears. To date the Forest Legacy Program has helped fund 247,800 acres of FWP conservation easements and 17,500 acres of fee title acquisitions. Much of this work has been completed in northwest Montana grizzly bear habitat to include enrolled Thompson-Fisher, North Swan, Kootenai Forestlands, and Haskill Basin conservation projects, which are easements held by FWP. So far, through partnerships and various programs like Habitat Montana, Forest Legacy, and SO3362 nearly 300,000 acres of habitat has been conserved in Northwest Montana alone. Much of this habitat lies between the NCDE and CYE, providing open space and connectivity between these recovery zones.

FWP is committed to conserving even more habitat to protect grizzly bears and connectivity habitat as opportunities arise.

Motorized Access

As described in the Plan and FEIS, most research suggests grizzly bear populations have done poorly when near humans and have primarily recovered in the most remote habitats. Most research has focused on the effects of motorized access and the displacement of bears, and most research suggests that not all grizzly bears respond to roads similarly. High-use roads are avoided far more than low-use roads. In addition, there are differences in how female and male grizzly bears use roads.

FWP holds a small proportion of the public lands that provide grizzly bear habitat, and many roads near FWP-administered lands do not fall under FWP jurisdiction. Still, on FWP lands, the agency strives to minimize open-road densities or seasonally close access to roads to limit disturbance to wildlife during sensitive periods. However, such actions are influenced by the site's physical attributes or, in some cases, by the need to provide access for various reasons including game population management via hunting. As a result, adjusting open-road density guidelines could conflict with the management of other species or lead to an inability to meet the guidelines in all situations. Other public land managers have committed to grizzly bear conservation, via forest plans, conservation strategies, and habitat conservation plans. These plans limit motorized access, including habitats with grizzly bears. In general, whether on FWP managed land or lands managed by federal agencies, road densities or road restrictions are based on the holistic use of the area by wildlife, as well as the types of recreation that occurs on that land. In sum, land management practitioners execute a balance of providing access to the public while also minimizing negative interactions with wildlife on those roads.

Reducing Wildlife-Vehicle Collisions

FWP and MDT will consider installing more wildlife crossing signs in the estimated occupied range of grizzly bears where deemed appropriate.

Over the past twenty years, vehicle collisions accounted for the top cause of mortality in grizzly bears. FWP has taken efforts and continues to take efforts to reduce the frequency that grizzly bears are killed via vehicle collisions. As an example, FWP is a partner to the Montana Wildlife and Transportation Partnership ("MWTP"), which includes the Montana Department of Transportation ("MDT") and Montanans for Safe Wildlife Passage. The partnership, formed in 2019, focuses on reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions by developing ways to accommodate wildlife movement across highways. The partnership designed a planning tool to assist stakeholders in identifying areas of need to focus resources and expertise for further analysis and aids in developing project-level recommendations. As a result, MWTP establishes a way for public-private partnerships to propose and carry out wildlife accommodation projects across Montana's highways. Communities and their partners can apply for funds to establish stand-alone wildlife accommodation projects within the state's highway infrastructure. These efforts to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions will benefit grizzly bears as structures designed to aid ungulates crossing highways can be fashioned to encourage use by bears. Some of these efforts are in "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears."

An additional example of FWP's contribution to accommodate safer wildlife movement focuses on wildlife moving to and from the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and Glacier National Park. Straddling the Continental Divide, these two areas also include a vital linkage to vast areas of public land to the south toward Yellowstone National Park.

U.S. Highway 2 and the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe ("BNSF") railroad line separate Glacier National Park from the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex and are barriers to wildlife movement. Wildlife-vehicle collisions along U.S. Highway 2 are a source of mortality for wildlife, including grizzly bears, as is the BNSF railroad through Wolf Creek and the lower Fisher River. These threats are both immediate and long-term. Several areas have been identified for consideration for wildlife crossings or other mitigation measures where MDT highway improvement projects are in progress.

Concern over accommodating wildlife movement has also led to a unique coalition of partners working together on this issue. The coalition includes the Crown Manager's Partnership ("CMP"), a working alliance among federal, state, provincial, tribal, and First Nation agency managers, and universities in Montana, Alberta, and British Columbia. FWP and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are CMP partners. One CMP project is the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative (Cushman et al. 2009), in which FWP participates. That project involves the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative and an interagency group of wildlife biologists working to identify U.S. Highway 2 and the railroad corridor as a priority area for wildlife connectivity planning (Ament and Creech 2016; Waller and Graves 2018). This area's wildlife includes moose, elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and grizzly bears. The local working group recently summarized existing research and is beginning to address additional research needs to prioritize specific highway mitigation efforts (Waller and Graves 2018).

In sum, FWP knows wildlife connectivity and safe passage across highways and railways is important to grizzly bear populations, and FWP plans to remain engaged in projects like the CMP and MWTP.

Ament, R., P. McGowen, M. McClure, A. Rutherford, C. Eliss, and J. Grebenc. 2014. Highway mitigation for wildlife in northwest Montana. Sonoran Institute, Northern Rockies Office, Bozeman, MT, 84 pp.

Cushman, S.A., K.S. McKelvey, and M.K. Schwartz. 2009. Use of empirically derived source-destination models to map regional conservation corridors. *Conservation Biology* 23:368-376.

Waller, J. and T. Graves. 2018. Keeping the Crown of the Continent Connected: an Interagency US2 Connectivity Workshop Report. Unpublished report. National Park Service, Glacier National Park. 30 pp.
<https://irma.nps.gov/DataStore/Reference/Profile/2259314>

Human-Bear Conflict Prevention and Management

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Believe the Plan emphasizes and tries to justify ways to kill non-conflict grizzly bears and reduce their numbers and range in Montana immediately upon delisting.
- Believe the Plan and DEIS imply FWP intends to aggressively kill grizzly bears that get into conflict and will not consider Tribal opinions on grizzly bear management.
- Believe the Plan lacks clarity on management of non-conflict bears outside core ecosystems and connectivity zones and suggests potential 'no bear zones.'
- Believe the Plan emphasizes hunting rather than careful stewardship and conflict prevention.
- Believe that hunting grizzly bears will not reduce human-bear conflicts and will do nothing to address the real issues that grizzly bears face, in Montana, in the future.
- Believe mortality thresholds should not prevent lethal removal of a dangerous grizzly bear or a conflict grizzly bear.
- Believe the removal of conflict bears should always take priority over grizzly bear hunting.
- Believe the removal of a conflict bear should never be prohibited because of a filled hunting quota.
- Believe FWP should concentrate on stewardship of grizzly bears to emphasize tools of conflict prevention, management response, assistance for those who may be subject to conflicts, cooperation with groups and NGOs toward conflict reduction, and enhanced outreach and education to increase public tolerance.
- Believe reducing attractants in connectivity areas will help to minimize human-bear conflicts, improve tolerance, and facilitate successful connectivity, and that FWP should emphasize reducing unsecured attractants to reduce human-bear conflict and mortalities of dispersing grizzly bears. .
- Believe conflict reduction work targeted to prime connectivity areas beyond the current proposal could be an important key to achieving full, legal recovery.
- Believe Commission release site criteria must be explicitly described and the subsequent decision for each relocation publicly reported.
- Believe FWP should proactively complete an environmental analysis for moving bears to unoccupied habitats for the purposes of connectivity or recovery.
- Believe relocation sites should not be limited to the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" maps shown in Appendix G, and that the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" maps and the process used to produce these maps are flawed, decreasing any possibility of connectivity between core areas.
- Believe that the Plan needs to recognize that hound hunting of black bears and wolf trapping using snares, traps, and bait in all areas where grizzly bears may be present are direct sources of human-bear conflicts that will result in the death of and/or injury to bears.
- Disagree that livestock are attractants and believe livestock should not be treated or addressed similarly to pet food, garbage, spilled grain, and animal carcasses.
- Believe that the state of Montana should develop limits and mandatory requirements for domestic chicken owners in grizzly bear habitat.
- Expressed concern that livestock-grizzly bear conflicts will result in removal of livestock from grazing allotments.
- Believe any guidance on removing livestock from public grazing allotments, in the interest of grizzly bears or for other reasons, is outdated.
- Believe a more aggressive response to livestock conflicts in areas where grizzly bears don't connect cornerstone areas could reduce livestock conflicts in those areas.
- Believe grizzly bears involved in conflicts with livestock should never be released on-site or relocated within the vicinity of livestock.
- Believe livestock owners in an area should be notified of problem grizzly bears or before a grizzly bear is released.
- Believe the Plan should provide clarity on protection for a livestock owner that unintentionally injures a grizzly bear while engaging predator control activities directed at other species.
- Support or do not support ARMs 12.9.1404-1416 as it pertains to protection of livestock and property on private and public lands.

- Believe the agency responsible for releasing or relocating a conflict grizzly bear should be liable for subsequent damages caused by that bear.
- Believe the Plan should identify ways to ensure grizzly bear conflict management programs do not deplete the resources and funding for other predator control programs.
- Believe the Plan should provide details on resources needed to fill conflict management gaps as grizzly bear populations expand.
- Believe bear spray is an inadequate tool for defending oneself from a bear and FWP is giving flawed advice by encouraging recreationists to carry bear spray.
- Believe hunters and recreationalists should be required to carry bear spray.
- Believe FWP should increase its work with partners in the area of human-conflict prevent and non-lethal management tools.
- Believe FWP should include more specifics about community engagement in preventing and resolve in human-bear conflicts.
- Believe new developments such as the Pacific Northwest Trail will further degrade grizzly bear habitat and impede recovery in the CYE.

RESPONSE:

As an initial matter, much of this response, below, is re-stated in other sections of our responses to comments. New information specifically responding to comments received on conflict management is shown in italics.

Grizzly Bear Conflict with Livestock

FWP does not provide guidance regarding the logistics of livestock on public grazing allotments. The land management agency or livestock producer may decide to change the logistics of livestock on public grazing allotments based on grizzly bear presence or distribution, among other factors. When livestock conflict does occur with grizzly bears, whether on public grazing allotments or private lands, the response is discussed and collectively decided upon by FWP, USFWS, and USDA-Wildlife Services (“WS”). Conflict response is discussed at length (pages 33, 42, 49, 109 of the Plan, and pages 34, 55 of the FEIS). Response to conflict(s) is/are highly dependent upon the situation and the same response is not applicable to every scenario. A conflict response may be more aggressive, such as if the bear is likely to be a multi-offender, is close to human settlement, or is in areas where tolerance is lower (*i.e.*, outside of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears,” recovery zones, or connectivity areas). Contrastingly, a conflict response may be less aggressive and may consist of hazing, assistance in removing deceased livestock, or installation of electric fencing. Conflict response is intended to reduce livestock conflict(s) wherever it occurs.

If conflict response is necessary, FWP may notify local landowners and livestock producers that a problem grizzly bear is nearby or of the conflict that occurred. Notification will be dependent upon the type of conflict and response necessary. Similarly, if FWP releases a grizzly bear at a Commission approved site, FWP may directly notify local landowners and livestock producers. In either event, exact timely locations are logistically difficult and/or may generate false expectations of awareness of all bears in an area.

Further, livestock owners and livestock producers are granted certain protections under § 87-6-106, and § 87-5-301, MCA (which was amended during the 2023 Legislative Session and required the adoption of ARMs 12.9.1404 and 1416, addressed below), and can be compensated, via the Montana Livestock Loss Board, for damage caused by grizzly bears - regardless of whether they were released or relocated. See §§ 2-15-3110 through 2-15-3114, 81-1-110 and 111, MCA. However, where damage caused by bears occurs outside of what is livestock-related, it is the responsibility of the private landowner to secure attractants and communicate the occurrence with FWP.

Given the fact that grizzly bear population expansions are hard to predict, additional resources needed to fill conflict management gaps will be addressed as necessary. New FTE positions may be created based on conflict occurrence and population expansion in or from core, occupied, and/or connectivity areas. Any resources and funding for the new FTE positions would be separate and aside from other predator control programs, which have their own separate and specified funding sources (e.g., § 87-1-623, § 87-1-625, MCA).

As noted above, § 87-5-301, MCA, was amended during the 2023 Legislative Session (SB 295). SB 295 clarified how Montana would manage delisted grizzly bears relative to human safety, conflict with livestock, and genetic exchange. SB295 also required the Commission to adopt rules prior to delisting. The Montana Secretary of State ("SOS") defines and implements the ARM development and amendment process, including process steps and timeline. This includes opportunities for public participation. At the Commission's June 8, 2023, meeting, the Commission approved the initiation of ARM rulemaking, and at the Aug. 17, 2023, meeting, the Commission edited the draft rule language proposed by FWP. This edit indicated that, following delisting, a livestock producer may remove a threatening grizzly bear on public land when the livestock producer demonstrated an effort to utilize one or more nonlethal and preventative measures. After including the edit, the Commission approved the proposed rules and initiated the formal Montana Administrative Procedure Act process with the SOS. On October 20, 2023, the Commission published MAR Notice No. 12-614 pertaining to the public hearing on the proposed adoption of new rules and amendment of ARM 12.9.1401 pertaining to grizzly bears. Public comment was received through November 20, 2023, and there was an opportunity to make oral comments on November 17, 2023, via Zoom. On December 14, 2023, the Commission approved New Rules I through XIII (ARM 12.9.1404-1416) and the amendment to 12.9.1401. The SOS approved New Rules I through XIII (ARM 12.9.1404-1416) and the amendment to 12.9.1401 with no edits on January 12, 2024. Any comments pertaining to these ARMs are outside of the scope of the Plan.

Human-Bear Conflict Coordination with Other Entities

FWP works collaboratively with several other agencies and partners to mitigate and resolve human-bear conflict. Although Tribal Nations each have their own management plans and or protocols regarding human-bear conflict, FWP works with Tribal Nations to ensure population longevity and sustainability. If conflict occurs on Tribal lands, tribes will use their biologists or agreements with other agencies to mitigate and respond to such occurrences.

FWP works intimately and consistently with other partners, agencies, groups, and NGOs regarding human-bear conflict. For example, FWP maintains an MOU with Wildlife Services to respond to human-bear conflict. Additionally, while listed, grizzly bear removal requires communication and coordination with the USFWS. FWP works with several local partners on human-conflict prevention and management tools. Such NGOs (e.g., Blackfoot Challenge, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, Western Landowners Alliance, Land Stewardship Project, Rocky Mountain Front Ranchlands Group, Heart of the Rockies Initiative, Defenders of Wildlife, Natural Resources Defense Council, Big Hole Watershed Committee, among others listed on page 105 of the Plan) work collaboratively with FWP to develop, fund, and implement non-lethal tools for conflict reduction (e.g., fencing, carcass composting, range riding). In fact, FWP organizes several enhanced outreach and education opportunities, such as the Carnivore Conflict Prevention Workshop, to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders and discuss prevention and response strategies. This community-level engagement expands to the Division of Communications and Education, which develops numerous educational and outreach programs that engage and inform the public about being bear-aware (pages 35, 43, 50, 116 in the Plan). Similarly, FWP is continuously looking to expand and increase its collaborations with such partners involved in local human-conflict prevention and management tools.

Hunting Grizzly Bears Will Not Reduce Human-Bear Conflicts

FWP believes a post-delisting grizzly bear hunt will be one of many important tools available to address conflicts on private land. FWP's judicious use of hunting in conflict situations is a part of, not separate from, FWP's comprehensive stewardship and commitment to Montana's thriving grizzly bear populations.

FWP's grizzly bear conservation and management tools detailed in existing plans, strategies, and agreements referenced and reviewed in this plan are in no way limited to or solely dependent on one activity. This plan unambiguously embraces accepted and new non-lethal conflict prevention and reduction tools, responsive management assistance, outreach and education, and hunting. FWP believes that when considered together, the use of these conservation and management tools will lead to the increased public tolerance and understanding needed to maintain Montana's thriving grizzly populations.

Specifically, regarding the allowance of hunting take limiting the ability to remove conflict grizzly bears, the Conservation Strategies for both the GYE and NCDE include a mortality limit for the respective Demographic Monitoring Areas. Any hunting mortality within the DMA will count against those mortality limits. This was reinforced in recent ARM rule amendments and adoptions by the Commission (ARM 12.9.1401 and 12.9.1404-1416), which were finalized in January 2024. The allowance of hunting would be based on whether there is 'room' for additional take after all other types of mortality have been tallied. This type of calculation allows for conflict bears to be removed, when necessary, prior to determining what is allowable for hunting. Regardless, the Plan and Conservation Strategies have allowances for flexibility when human safety is in jeopardy or in cases where other management tools have been unsuccessful in resolving a conflict situation. Commission approval of any hunting will consider mortality limits set for Demographic Monitoring Areas. Decisions on hunting limits outside of Demographic Monitoring Areas will be made by the Commission with consideration for the importance of connectivity between Ecosystems.

Trapping or hunting of other species in certain areas may be direct sources of human-bear conflicts that could result in human injury or death or death and/or injury to bears. The use of snares for wolf trapping may result in incidental grizzly bear captures. Incidental captures involving grizzly bears are documented and reported in publicly available incidental reports. Additional mechanisms may be used to regulate take and minimize incidental captures. This includes rigorous tracking of harvest in each Trapping District and WMU through mandatory harvest reporting and a 24-hour closure notice process. The Commission also adopted a set of regulatory components to reduce human safety concerns, reduce risk of overharvest, and reduce the probability of take for federally protected lynx and grizzly bears. These mechanisms have been put in place to ensure harvest does not exceed acceptable limits and that there is no risk to the wolf population that would place it in need of ESA relisting, or to other species as a result of the wolf regulations. Similarly, wolf regulations should not impact other federally listed species or the ability to delist or keep delisted those species. For example, the Commission restricted wolf trapping in the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" until December 31, to avoid incidental take of grizzly bears. However, if grizzly bears are hibernating prior to December 31, the wolf trapping season may open earlier (*i.e.*, floating season start date). The Commission can adjust seasons annually, regionally, and on short notice to address harvest rate and population trajectory or concerns to species like lynx or grizzly bears. Overall, the number of occurrences of incidental take of grizzly bears has a negligible impact to their populations. See page 132 of the Plan.

Conflicts Resultant from Recreational Activity

The Department and Commission make decisions within the sideboards of legislative directives that address the intent of the directive while maintaining recreational opportunity and wildlife population viability. Even following a delisting of the grizzly bear, the Department and Commission would continue to prioritize prevention of human-grizzly bear conflicts that may result from recreational activities such as black bear hunting with hounds and wolf trapping. These activities can be designed and timed for human safety and the protection of grizzly bears in mind, regardless of the federally listed status of the grizzly bear. In addition, existing statute requires the protection of the species to prevent federal listing.

Legislation passed during the 2023 Montana legislation session provides livestock owners with clarified flexibility to lethally remove a grizzly bear attacking or killing livestock following federal delisting. See §§ 87-5-301 and 87-6-106, MCA; see also ARMs 12.9.1404-1416.

The following underlined language has been added to the Recreation section in Part III of the Plan (page 84 of the FEIS). "Recreationists have largely unhindered access to millions of acres of undeveloped land. Some of this land is currently, or based on documented trends of increasing distribution will be, occupied by grizzly bears. As bear numbers and distribution increase and the number of outdoor enthusiasts grow, contact and interaction with people engaged in outdoor activities is likely to increase. As part of FWP's conflict prevention efforts there are targeted messaging campaigns for hikers, cyclists, campers and hunters. Messages have been designed to reach black bear hunters and wolf trappers.

Bear spray is currently not a requirement for any type of recreation on public lands. However, it is highly recommended as a prevention tool for human safety and interactions with grizzly bears (page 104 of the Plan). New developments designed to have negligible impacts on the environment and local habitat, may assist in conserving natural landscapes and assist in grizzly bear recovery.

Proactive Removal of Conflict-Free Grizzly Bears

The Plan is clear that in areas where grizzly bear expansion does not contribute to connectivity, FWP would have a lower tolerance for grizzly bears involved in conflicts. The following underlined text has been added (page 9 of the Plan and page 40 of the FEIS) to clarify the direction on removal of grizzly bears:

Grizzly bears will not be proactively removed on public or private lands outside of core habitats unless the bear is exhibiting human habituated and or dangerous behaviors and non-lethal efforts at harassment have been unsuccessful. FWP would use available discretion to remove or relocate grizzly bears involved in conflicts with humans, particularly in areas where connectivity among population cores is unlikely.

This statement explains the balance required to allow grizzly bears to move outside core areas while prioritizing coexistence and human safety, particularly in areas unlikely to support connectivity to other areas.

The following text has been edited on pages 7 and 9 of the Plan, and page 40 of the FEIS to clarify that grizzly bears will not be proactively removed in connectivity areas if they are conflict free:

Because there are no cornerstone populations of grizzly bears in Central or Eastern Montana (nor does FWP envision a future in which there will be any), there is nothing with which to connect bears from the west. While grizzly bear presence would not be an objective in areas far from largely mountain habitats and in prairie habitats where agricultural development predominates, individual animals in these areas would be accepted to the degree they remain conflict-free.

Note: This statement previously read "could be accepted."

Conflict Prevention and Guidance from the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council

FWP takes very seriously the recommendations of the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council ("GBAC"). With respect to managing grizzly bears in connectivity areas, the GBAC recommended:

- Recommendation 2. The identification of areas between established recovery zones that best contribute to genetic and demographic connectivity is necessary to prioritize resource allocation, focus outreach and education efforts, build social tolerance, and proactively engage local communities and landowners.
- Recommendation 3. As expansion occurs outside the four recovery Ecosystems and the landscapes in-between them in Montana, FWP and relevant agencies will have to balance this expansion with the need to prioritize resources that support both public and private lands. This would include resources, personnel, and conflict prevention/ mitigation strategies well ahead of grizzly bear expansion into unprepared areas.

Accordingly, the preferred alternative prioritizes: (1) bear manager FTE funding where expanding populations present the need for conflict management and opportunities for connectivity while maintaining such efforts in occupied core areas; and, (2) information, outreach, and communication work where expanding populations present the need for conflict management and opportunities for connectivity while maintaining such efforts in occupied core areas.

As expected, FWP and partners have been and will continue to remain active in conflict management and prevention efforts throughout the core Ecosystems. One example of conflict management and prevention efforts is FWP's heavy emphasis on reducing unsecured attractants to mitigate human-bear conflicts—and the potential mortality of dispersing bears—wherever grizzly bear presence is new to residents and where grizzlies are well established and known to occur. However, FWP is also taking efforts to increase transparency and public awareness of grizzly bears in connectivity areas. Recently, FWP hired bear management specialists in the connectivity areas of Anaconda, Conrad, and Hamilton. FWP bear specialists regularly visit outlying communities where grizzly presence is new to enable coexistence between bears and humans.

While FWP cannot point to exact future needs or resources to fund additional outreach and education efforts, it is nonetheless committed to continue building the program where necessary. FWP will make all reasonable efforts to implement actions that minimize bear removal. However, even with the increased focus on outreach and education in areas outside of core areas, sometimes a need will emerge to remove grizzly bears that cause conflict(s). As grizzly bear presence expands or additional conflict reduction work in core, occupied, and/or connectivity areas is needed, FWP may create new FTE positions. This committed level of staffing may assist in achieving legal recovery in certain Ecosystems. FWP's on-the-ground communication and work is aimed at directly facilitating grizzly bear connectivity between Ecosystems.

The following underlined language was added to highlight another partnership effort (page 105 of the Plan): Missoula Bear Smart Working Group, which has written a Missoula Bear Hazard Assessment and a Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan for the city and surrounding areas. The conflict plan was unanimously adopted by Missoula County Commissioners and the Missoula City Council.

Management of Attractants

FWP works with federal and state land managers on revisions to the plans that guide their decisions on issues of concern such as motorized access, food storage requirements, and seasonal land closures. National forest plans, conservation strategies, and habitat conservation plans include enforceable commitments that promote secure grizzly bear populations. FWP will follow advice of the GBAC in seeking and enforcing consistent food storage requirements across state and federal lands, and encouraging subdivisions to consider appropriate food storage requirements.

Attractants were defined in 2019 by the NCDE subcommittee as “[a]nything that attracts a bear to a site.” In the experience of FWP and partners, small livestock like poultry can be particularly attractive to a grizzly bear but larger livestock and in particular young of the year, like calves and lambs, can also be particularly attractive. Livestock are considered attractants for the purposes of the Plan and EIS.

Any removal of livestock from a grazing allotment is a decision made by the land management authority and outside the scope of this Plan. Similarly, placing restrictions on the possession of domestic chickens in grizzly bear habitat is outside the authority of FWP and this Plan.

Other attractants may include, but are not limited to, apiaries, fruiting gardens, bird feeders, and trash or garbage receptacles.

Legislation passed during the 2023 Montana legislation session provides livestock owners with clarified flexibility to lethally remove a grizzly bear attacking or killing livestock following federal delisting (§ 87-5-301 and § 87-6-106, MCA).

Release Sites for Relocating Grizzly Bears

Each FWP region works with their federal and state land management partners to maintain a list of suitable release sites for grizzly bears needing to be relocated. FWP bear managers always obtain specific permission from these partners prior to releasing animals. FWP Region 1 operates under a relocation plan jointly developed with the Flathead, Kootenai, and Lolo National Forests. FWP Region 2 operates under a “[r]elocation protocol and interim decision-making process for grizzly bear occurrences in outlying area,” jointly developed with USFWS, BLM, DNRC, CSKT, Blackfoot Challenge, and the Lolo, Helena-Lewis and Clark, Bitterroot, and Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests. FWP Regions 3 and 5 operate under a relocation plan developed jointly with the Custer Gallatin and Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forests. FWP Region 4 operates under a relocation plan developed jointly with the Lewis and Clark National Forest.

As required by legislation signed into law in 2021, the Commission approved a list of sites to which grizzly bears may be released. Maps of these sites are included in the Plan as Appendix G. Ideal sites meet the following criteria: 1) site is not a designated trailhead; 2) site is not a designated or known dispersed camping site; 3) site is not immediately adjacent to private land, unless that private landowner has given explicit permission; 4) site is not an active grazing allotment with livestock present; 5) site is not currently occupied by humans conducting work such as timber harvest nor is the site serving as a human encampment for such activities; and 6) site is far enough from capture site as to make it less likely for the bear to return to the conflict site. Ideally, release sites are some distance behind locked gates and remote enough to prevent recurring conflict. Some designated release sites may never be used or used very infrequently. FWP would complete an Environmental Analysis before FWP decides to move a grizzly bear outside of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears.”

The “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” map, located in the Plan (Appendix G), assists in determining release sites, among other things. The “estimated occupied range of grizzly bear” map is not flawed. These maps and the methods used to produce them have been peer-reviewed and successfully estimate the relatively contiguous area(s) where grizzly bears have established residency or have concentrated movements and habitat use. While included in the analyses, highly-spaced peripheral and outlier locations often fail to contribute to the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears,” because they are sparse and lack “nearest neighbors.” This is not a flaw in the analysis, but an intended component of it, designed to draw a distinction between the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” and (the larger) extent of occurrence. The “may be present map,” which does include those highly-spaced peripheral and outlier locations (most often collected and recorded by FWP and shared with USFWS), reflects the extent of occurrence, but may not be representative of where bears have established residency.

FWP believes the use of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” map is more appropriate for selecting relocation sites: (a) to avoid making potentially unlawful “transplants into new areas” according to state regulations, and (b) to avoid creating the perception among the public that we are reintroducing bears into new areas.

The “may be present” map (Figure 4 in both the Plan and FEIS), which is produced by the USFWS, is primarily used for agencies to determine if a Section 7 ESA consultation is required.

FWP will coordinate with other states and agencies on the use of relocation sites outside of recovery areas, including sites outside of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears.”

Tribal Involvement in Plan Development

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Suggest FWP has not meaningfully consulted with Montana Indian tribes on grizzly bear management.

- Suggest tribes be “co-managers” with the state for all wildlife.

RESPONSE:

Part of FWP communications during plan development included sharing an early work-in-progress draft with CSKT wildlife officials. Interaction also included information and learning exchanges with FWP’s plan coordinator on two half-day tours of the Flathead Reservation that focused on grizzly bears. Also, over a two-day virtual meeting on January 27-28, 2021, FWP collaborated with the tribes on reviewing the management approaches employed by FWP’s grizzly bear specialists. Both CSKT and the Blackfeet Tribe participated in these virtual discussions.

Additionally, FWP followed statewide management plan completion requirements for “consulting and incorporating the guidance and rules from a variety of existing federal and state plans. At the ecosystem level, Native Indian tribes possessing grizzly habitat within the recovery areas have been involved in development of those plans through the IGBC and other forums.” (<http://igbconline.org/story-of-the-igbc/> igbconline.org).

FWP fully respects the tribe’s viewpoints relative to grizzly bear hunting, as noted in the FEIS, which states:

“A statewide management plan will help demonstrate the adequacy of regulatory mechanisms that would be a consideration of delisting. With delisting, hunting becomes a viable management tool, although if hunting were to occur, those mortalities would, where appropriate, count against established mortality thresholds in the GYE and NCDE. Tribes have gone on record as opposing sport hunting of grizzly bears, which could be allowed if delisted. More than 170 tribes, including most Montana tribes, signed a treaty in 2016 opposing delisting, primarily because of opposition to sport hunting.”

The FEIS further concedes:

“The potential for hunting is a key reason some grizzly bear advocates, particularly tribes, oppose delisting. “The sovereignty and spiritual rights of tribal nations in Montana and Wyoming are threatened by the proposed delisting,” Ivan Posey said in a 201[4] open letter from the Montana and Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council to the USFWS. The tribes fear that delisting will lead to sport hunting under state management. Hunting off tribal reservations could redistribute bears onto tribal lands where hunting would not be allowed, leading to an increase in human-bear conflicts.” <http://www.indianz.com/News/2015/01/09/mtwytletter.pdf> [indianz.com](http://www.indianz.com)”

In forthrightly presenting these firmly held tribal principles, FWP hopes to show its profound respect for the cultural significance grizzly bears represent among indigenous peoples, particularly Montana’s Blackfeet Tribe and CSKT. These tribes continue to hold essential roles in Montana grizzly bear conservation and management in cooperation with FWP and several federal agencies.

FWP is honored to continue its long-standing relationship with the Blackfeet Tribe and CSKT and holds in high regard their traditional knowledge that informs management and provides habitat for grizzly bears in Montana. FWP respects the tribes’ rationale for opposing grizzly bear hunting and is committed to consulting with Blackfeet and CSKT authorities to address objections to a grizzly bear hunting season near reservation boundaries or within other areas of particular tribal concern, such as areas important for connectivity.

The CSKT confirmed, via their comment letter on the draft management plan and DEIS, that the tribes understand the Plan would be implemented should the species be delisted. The comment letter describes the important accomplishments CSKT biologists have achieved while working “with inter-agency groups to ensure the management of sustainable grizzly bear populations while also maintaining protection of grizzly bears in the NDCE in a manner that ensures human safety.” FWP will maintain a focus on interagency coordination in implementing the Plan post-delisting.

Monitoring

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Requested more information on how FWP plans to better understand grizzly bear abundance and population trends outside of Ecosystems as the Plan indicates intention to do so.
- Do not want grizzly bears to establish in the Bitterroot Ecosystem ("BE").
- Want grizzly bears to recover in the BE (naturally and/or with augmentation).
- Believe current methods of estimating populations are flawed and/or inadequate.
- Believe current methods of estimating the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" are flawed and/or inadequate.
- Believe FWP should be using different techniques for monitoring, such as integrated population modeling that uses DNA sampling in addition to radio collaring.
- Believe there are biases in methods and errors of extrapolation in current population monitoring methods.
- Suggest including additional counties to the analysis area as grizzly bears have been observed in areas outside of the 30-county area.
- Believe any grizzly bear captured or found dead should have DNA samples collected to determine if reproduction has occurred between NCDE and GYE bears.
- Suggest updating all population and mortality information as the Plan is using data up to 2019 only.

RESPONSE:

Western Montana provides the primary habitat for grizzly bears. Although possible, it is unlikely that counties further east would be affected, so they are not discussed in the Plan. While the Plan encompasses the entire state of Montana, the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" (Figure 3 in the Plan and FEIS), as well as areas where grizzly bears "may be present" (Figure 4 in the Plan and FEIS) are located in Western Montana. Areas where grizzly bears may be present includes scattered and/or dispersing individuals, not necessarily established individuals.

Grizzly bear populations will continue to be monitored and estimated with the best available science and with the most modern techniques. FWP researchers and biologists have decades of expertise and work with equally experienced scientists within the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team ("IGBST"), Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee ("IGBC") and USFWS. At present, FWP is not attempting to estimate numbers of bears between recovery areas, but continues to collect data on observations, which contribute to estimation of the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" and understanding of general trends. Outside of the Ecosystems, FWP will opportunistically record and incorporate data of grizzly bears as it pertains to statewide abundance and population trends. FWP has hired several grizzly bear specialist and technicians to work in areas outside of recovery areas to proactively work on conflict prevention and to respond to conflicts if and when they occur.

In addition to the above, FWP, in cooperation with federal and tribal partners, will continue to conduct ongoing monitoring of grizzly bear populations to better understand trends in abundance, distribution, and habitat use, as well as ancillary information that helps direct management. Most efforts are guided by inter-agency agreements currently in place. In brief, inter-agency biologists focus their ongoing monitoring efforts on five areas: GYE, NCDE, CYE, BE, and SE (the last of which does not overlap Montana). FWP is committed to continuing its participation in these monitoring efforts and management activities. This includes augmentations, translocations, and natural connectivity.

FWP is aware that the USFWS is assessing options for restoring grizzly bears in the BE. Specifically, on January 17, 2024, the USFWS announced a public scoping period to consider options for restoring grizzly bears to the BE. The initial public scoping period ended on March 18, 2024. Currently, the USFWS is reviewing comments and working on the draft EIS. Please visit www.fws.gov/BitterrootEIS for more information on how you can become notified and/or involved in the BE Grizzly Bear EIS Project. Given that the project is led by the USFWS, comments pertaining to the establishment/recovery of grizzly bears in the BE are outside of the Plan and should be directed to the USFWS.

Lastly, FWP remains committed to the population objectives contained in the GYE and NCDE Conservation Strategies. In brief, FWP and partners would manage mortalities from all sources to maintain the population at or above established thresholds, as described in the GYE Conservation Strategy. In the NCDE, FWP would continue to manage mortalities from all sources to support an estimated probability of at least 90% that the grizzly bear population within the NCDE Demographic Monitoring Area ("DMA") remains above 800 bears. Achieving this level of probability translates to about 1,000 bears, at least, in the NCDE DMA. There are no explicit numerical objectives for grizzly bears outside of these two area-specific Conservation Strategies.

These Conservation Strategies outline specific methodologies that use best available science to estimate and monitor population abundance and trends. FWP remains committed to these interagency Conservation Strategies for accuracy of estimates and consistency across the west. Other techniques (e.g., integrated population models) will be considered as they are developed and refined, and FWP will continue to use the best available science as practical and applicable. DNA sampling is regularly conducted when an individual is captured or using hair-snares, and this data is incorporated in our monitoring efforts using mark-recapture analyses. See the "Current status of identified grizzly bear populations in Montana" section of the Plan starting on page 87.

DNA sample collection

Cooperating agencies in all jurisdictions make every effort to collect DNA samples from all captured bears, all bear mortalities, and opportunistically at natural rubs or conflict sites. They evaluate the population of origin for successful genotypes and report on movements of genotyped bears outside of core populations in annual reports. The NCDE Conservation Strategy (2019) articulates an objective to "monitor demographic and genetic connectivity among populations," including estimating the spatial distribution of the NCDE population biennially, and identifying the population of origin for individuals sampled inside and outside of the DMA to detect movements of individuals to and from other populations or recovery areas. The following language has been copied from the Tri-State Memorandum of Agreement, which is currently being updated, and added to the language within the Preferred Alternative description of grizzly bear distribution and connectivity on page 47 of the Plan and page 53 of the FEIS. "As a cooperative effort of the IGBST, the Parties [of the Tri-State Memorandum of Agreement] will continue to conduct genetic sampling of GYE grizzly bears (i.e., biological samples will be acquired from grizzly bear captures, mortality investigations, or other methods), and will analyze these samples to evaluate genetic diversity and connectivity with other grizzly bear populations." This statement has also been added: "Samples will be collected from captured and dead bears in areas outside the GYE as possible for genetic fitness monitoring." In the GYE and SE, the monitoring team continues to estimate population of origin and document movements using population genetics and pedigree analyses. To date, movements of individuals among the NCDE, GYE, and SE populations have been documented, but no interbreeding of grizzly bears from different ecosystems has been observed (except for individuals moved for Cabinet Mountain augmentation). Successful genotyping, analyses of population of origin, and parentage analyses for DNA samples collected from several outlier locations have provided evidence of long-range dispersal movements by male bears (128-215 km).

Updating Information

The 2018 "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" map has been replaced with a 2023 version. The 2021 'grizzly bears may be present' map has been replaced with a 2022 version.

Mortality thresholds are outlined under the "Numerical objectives" section of the Preferred Alternative (page 46 in the Plan and page 51 in the FEIS) and summaries of the Conservation Strategies (page 55 in the Plan and pages 47, 98 in the FEIS). Trends in mortalities are described on page 139 of the Plan and account for data through 2020. Annual Ecosystem reports include mortalities within and outside of Ecosystems, and include mortalities from all causes. Mortality thresholds are established relevant to the population estimate, which is derived for the DMAs.

The following sections within the “[c]urrent status of identified grizzly bear populations” sections have been updated with more recent data and/or adjusted for clarity with the deleted text struck through and new text underlined (pages 87-93 in the Plan).

Yellowstone area – including parts of Wyoming and Idaho

Abundance and trend

In a thorough re-assessment of protocols used to estimate population sizes from observed females-with-cubs, IGBST (2021) considered both the distance rule used to differentiate “unique” from “previously accounted for” females who otherwise could not be differentiated each year, and the statistical approaches used both to interpolate any given years’ best estimate and to infer population trends from a time series of such counts (as corrected by the Chao2 frequency-of-capture method). An objective of this work was to move from an algorithm that prioritized minimizing false positive identifications of females-with-cubs (ensuring that any bias in the resulting estimate would produce under-estimates rather than over-estimates of true abundance, but at the cost of decreasing sensitivity to changes in abundance with true population increase) to one that balanced the objectives of accuracy (thus increasing sensitivity to true population change) with minimizing the probability of over-estimation. IGBST (2021) recommended that this balancing was best achieved by revising the distance criterion (by which otherwise undifferentiable females-with-cubs were considered unique) from 30 to 16 km. This revision reduced under-estimation bias considerably, while limiting to probability of any given year’s estimate being biased substantially high to between 3% and 12%. ~~For 2019, the point estimate of 737 grizzly bears (Haroldson et al. 2020), would be replaced with a more accurate estimate of about 1,040.~~

The IGBST, working with University of Montana collaborators, has developed an integrated population model (IPM) to further enhance the estimation of total population size in the GYE (IGBST 2023 – this will be the annual report). The IPM will replace the refined Chao2 (IGBST 2021) as the best available science for estimating the GYE population. An integrated population model mathematically integrates annual count data with a traditional population projection model that estimates the change in population size from one year to the next using sex- and age-specific survival and reproductive rates. With adoption of the IPM, the IGBST has recalibrated prior year population estimates so they are comparable over time, and vital rates and demographics for the GYE population may now be reviewed annually so that managers are able to make appropriate adjustments to mortality rates. This approach is well suited to the GYE grizzly bear monitoring program because, since 1983, the IGBST has not only obtained annual estimates of females-with-cubs (i.e., count data), but has also obtained data on survival and reproduction rates by monitoring a sizable sample of radio-marked bears. By utilizing all of these historic and ongoing data sources simultaneously, the IPM approach is expected to lead to better total population estimation and better insight into population trend. Additionally, by examining model output with and without certain data inputs, the IPM can be used to evaluate which data sources are most important for estimation of population size and trend and will allow for additional data sources or modules in the future.

We have less information about abundance of grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area beyond the DMA boundary because the surveys for females with cubs are not conducted beyond the DMA. During the years 2012–2019, the number of females-with-cubs estimated outside the DMA averaged about 7% of the number estimated within the DMA and other information suggests that males are disproportionately represented among bears outside the DMA.

Northern Continental Divide area

Abundance and trend

Using mark-recapture analyses—with marks being DNA recovered from hair—Kendall et al. (2009) estimated the 2004 population of grizzly bears within their 33,480 km² survey area as 765 (95% CI = 715–831). Mace et al. (2012) used vital rates (e.g., birth, date, and migration rates) from bears monitored during 2004–2009 to estimate λ , the annual rate of growth, as approximately 3% per year (1.031; 95% CI = 0.928–1.102). Projecting this rate of growth to the estimated abundance in 2004, they estimated population size (including some areas adjacent to the NCDE area) at greater than 1,000 in 2009. Costello et al. (2016) used similar methods in updating the rate of growth during the

2004–2014 period. Depending on how the analysis handled independent females whose fates were undetermined, λ was estimated as 1.020 or 1.027 (with a mean of 1.023). Stochastic simulations yielded a similar mean, with 95% confidence limits of 1.015–1.029. These analyses suggested a 2014 population size of 960 bears (95% CI = 946–1,089). Independently, and using mark-recapture and DNA approaches similar to those of Kendall et al. (2009) but in a spatially-explicit framework, Kendall et al. (2019) estimated λ during 2004–2012 within their 33,300 km² study area as 1.043 (95% 1.017–1.069), although it was slightly higher for females than for males. In 2018, a predicted population projection, assuming 2004-2014 vital rates within the DMA, estimated that the population would increase from 1,068 bears in 2019 to 1,163 bears in 2023.

Cabinet-Yaak area

Abundance and trend

The population of grizzly bears in the CY area, although slowly increasing, remains small. As of the end of 2021, approximately 60–65 grizzly bears were estimated to inhabit the CY area (including 4 translocated as part of the augmentation program), with slightly more than half of these in the Yaak portion of the area. Fourteen of the 22 bear management units within the USFWS recovery area were occupied by females with young for at least one year during 2016–2021 (10 in 2021). The population was estimated to have grown at a rate of approximately 1.9% annually between 2012 and 2021, albeit with considerable uncertainty (Kasworm et al. 2022). While reproductive rates have been comparable to other grizzly bear populations in Montana and elsewhere in the Rocky Mountains, adult female survival rates have only risen to a level supporting population growth in the years since 2007.

Beginning in 1990, concerns about low population size led to a program called “augmentation”—meaning the augmenting of a bear population by adding a new bear from outside it. Under this program, grizzly bears occasionally were moved from other areas into the Cabinet portion of the CY area. From 1990 to 1994, the USFWS augmented the CY area with an initial 4 bears (3 of which remained for over 1 year) from British Columbia and from 2005 to 2019—after FWP began cooperating with USFWS on this program in 2005—another 18 (10 females, 8 males) from the Flathead River drainage. Of these 22 total bears, 16 stayed at least 1 year, while 5 (3 females, 2 males) are known to have produced offspring in the area and 7 are known to have died. The 3 females have produced at least 15 cubs, who in turn are responsible for at least 23 2nd-generation offspring. The augmentation program is considered to have saved the Cabinet segment of the CY population from extirpation (Kasworm et. al 2022).

Managing Mortalities

SOME REVIEWERS:

- Believe grizzly bear mortalities outside of the DMAs should be assigned to and counted against mortality limits of a specific Ecosystem.
- Believe the Plan’s lack of any cumulative mortality monitoring, particularly with new threats from recreational activities is irresponsible.
- Believe the Plan should be clearer in that it tracks all mortalities, not just human caused.
- Believe the translocation of a grizzly bear to the GYE should not result in an increase in the allowable mortality by one bear.
- Want to see data associated with grizzly bear-human conflicts, specifically regarding the amount and frequency of grizzly bear and human mortalities.
- Are concerned of repercussions if one protects themselves from a threatening grizzly bear.

Monitoring conducted in the NCDE, GYE and CYE is cumulative and considers all sources of mortality. The following underlined text has been added to this statement in the Commitments made under the two Conservation Strategies section: “[m]anage mortalities from all sources, including but not limited to hunting and the loss of grizzly bears by translocation out of the NCDE...”

Annual Ecosystem reports include mortalities within and outside of Ecosystems, and include mortalities from all causes. Mortality thresholds are established relevant to the population estimate, which is derived for the DMAs. Mortalities that occur outside of the DMAs, therefore, are not associated with this population estimate.

Mortality of a translocated bear

The following “process consideration” is copied from Appendix I, “Protocol and Considerations for Genetic Augmentation of Grizzly Bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem”: “[f]or any translocated individuals that survive and remain in the GYE Demographic Monitoring Area (DMA) at least 1 year, that year’s allowable mortality limit for that gender for the GYE (as per the GYE Conservation Strategy) would be increased by one to account for the unanticipated addition of that individual, reinforcing that the augmentation is for genetic, not demographic purposes.” It is outside the scope of this Plan to alter this language.

Mortality of a bear involved in human-conflict

Human safety and conflict response is discussed at length (pages 33, 48, 104 in the Plan and pages 33, 40, 54, 63 in the FEIS). This includes bears involved in livestock-conflict, as well as bears that have habituated to human presence, both passive (e.g., attractants associated with the home) and active (e.g., recreational activities) human activity. While decisions for lands managed by entities other than FWP are outside the scope of this Plan, FWP works with other land management agencies to prioritize human safety. At times, areas of public land may close to recreation as a result of a grizzly bear involved in human-conflict or increased grizzly bear activity. FWP distributes press releases and public notices regarding bears involved in human-conflict. This data may be made available through a public records request. Other regulations pertaining to human safety and protection may be passed by the legislature or the commission.

§ 87-6-106, MCA states “(4) When a grizzly bear poses a threat to a person through consistent presence or proximity to people or inhabited dwellings, the person may contact the department. If, on investigation, the department finds the grizzly bear is a threat, the department may control, trap, or remove the grizzly bear or issue a permit to the person to kill the grizzly bear to mitigate the threat to human safety.” This will only occur once grizzly bears are delisted. While grizzly bears are listed, you cannot harass, injure or kill a grizzly bear if it is threatening you.

Miscellaneous Topics

COMMENT:

- Some reviewers requested changes to text quoted directly from existing public documents, e.g., Executive Order authorizing the GBAC, problem statement from 2019 structured decision-making process, appendices. Example: One reviewer requested the word “some” be inserted in front of “people” in the following sentence; “[g]rizzly bears are valued by people and cultures across Montana and around the world”.

RESPONSE: Text has not been altered, as suggested, in cases where the language was quoted from a published document or was developed with a group outside of this Plan and DEIS process. As such, the word “some” has not been added to the following sentence to reflect what may in fact be true; “[g]rizzly bears are valued by people and cultures across Montana and around the world”.

Language from the 2019 structured-decision making process has been edited back to its original text from 2019. Language from the preamble report of the GBAC has been edited back to its original text.

No text found within the appendices has been edited.

COMMENT:

- Some reviewers criticized the fact that we did not include all available information in the Supplementary Information section.

RESPONSE: This section was meant to briefly describe major issues, but anyone interested can consult the vast literature for more details. It is impossible for a specific version of the Plan to mirror new science as it is always changing. The Plan, and grizzly bear management, is meant to be adaptive as science evolves.

COMMENT:

- Some commented that we did not use all available human dimensions research regarding the presence, management, and conservation of grizzly bears.

RESPONSE: FWP was not aware of the research by Canepa et al. 2008 at the time the first draft of this Plan was completed. Information from that study has not been added to this final draft. Since completion of the first draft an additional paper titled "Human dimensions of grizzly bear conservation: the social factors underlying satisfaction and coexistence beliefs in Montana, USA" (Nesbitt et al. 2023) has also been published. Information from that study is nothing new compared to what has been already summarized and distributed, however, it has been added and included to be fully transparent.

NEW Section added to the Plan: Recreational Activities that Threaten Grizzly Bears

Black Bear Hunting with Hounds

The 2021 Montana Legislature passed House Bill 68 allowing licensed hunters to chase black bears with hounds during the spring. The Commission later determined the districts and management units where this activity is valid. The Commission has the authority to close areas in anticipation of conflicts between hunters and grizzly bears.

The following text has been added to sections where appropriate: "Increase efforts to reach recreationists including black bear hunters using hounds and wolf trappers with appropriate messages."

A map from the 2023-2024 hunting regulations showing where black bear management units has been included in the Plan.

Wolf Harvest Season

The 2021 Montana Legislature passed House Bill 224 allowing the use of snares, for wolf trapping, in addition to the already Commission-approved use of footholds, for wolf trapping, from 2012. The Commission later determined the districts and management units where snaring is valid. The Commission has the authority to close areas in anticipation of conflicts between hunters and grizzly bears. Other tools, equipment, and strategies allowed in wolf hunting and trapping are outlined in § 87-1-901, MCA.

FWP acknowledges that hunting black bears with hounds and using snares and bait to trap or hunt wolves could pose a threat to grizzly bears and could lead to incidental take mortalities. Incidental take of grizzly bears by hound hunters has not been documented in Montana. Moreover, incidental take of grizzly bears, by recreational wolf trappers, has not occurred since 2013. Accordingly, the Commission's establishment of the floating season dates, for wolf trapping, has been successful in mitigating incidental take of grizzly bears by traps set for wolves.

To avert conflict with grizzly bears that have yet to den for the winter, Montana trapping regulations require FWP to carefully consider opening and closing dates for wolf trapping in the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears." FWP determines the risk of opening wolf trapping in the "estimated occupied range of grizzly bears" starting the Monday following Thanksgiving, and continues throughout December, based on feedback from field staff on bear

activity. Feedback includes on the ground sightings, landowner/bear conflicts, food availability and weather, as well as the utilization of telemetry and GPS to determine if grizzly bears are denning.

Trappers are urged to exercise caution throughout the trapping season as bears can potentially be active at any time, including grizzly bears that leave dens during winter. Additionally, trappers are encouraged to avoid trapping in areas where grizzly bear sign is detected.

It is in the best interest of FWP—and within statutory direction—to limit human-grizzly bear conflicts and incidental take that could result from activities such as black bear hunting with hounds and wolf trapping and hunting. FWP will suggest regulation adjustments for Commission approval when implementing state law to ensure FWP adequately manages grizzly bears including grizzly mortality, as required for delisting.

The “may be present” map (Figure 4 in both documents) will help communicate possible presence of grizzly bears. The “may be present” methodology is derived from current distributions and verified location data including single data points outside the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears.” This map is regularly updated under direction of the Conservation Strategies.

The following text has been added to sections where appropriate (page 50 in the Plan, page 58 in FEIS): “Increase efforts to reach recreationists including black bear hunters and wolf trappers with appropriate messages.”

A map from the hunting regulations showing where trapping in 2023 was allowed has been included in the Plan.

UPDATES, CORRECTIONS, AND INCREASING CLARITY (NOT ALREADY COVERED IN SECTIONS ABOVE)

Throughout the Document

UPDATE: Modeled averaged Chao2 method of population estimate has been replaced with revised Knight/Chao2 (vanManen et al. 2023) (per Demographic Criterion 3) throughout the document. As of 2023, the population estimate for the GYE will be derived using an integrated population model with the revised Chao2 as a key input.

Executive Summary (pages 5, 46 in the Plan and page 51 in the FEIS)

ERROR: The Plan inadvertently misused the term conservation-reliant stating that “grizzly bears will always require intensive management because the threats they face can never be eliminated, only managed.”

CORRECTION: The following underlined language has been added to clarify the meaning of conservation reliant: FWP views grizzly bears as both “conservation-reliant” (meaning the threats grizzly bears face can never be eliminated, only managed; Goble et al. 2012) and “conflict-prone”... A new citation, Goble et al. 2012, has also been added within the Preferred Alternative section.

Purpose and Need

CLARIFICATION: The following underlined text has been added for clarity in both documents (page 20 in Plan and pages 18, 90, 92 in the FEIS: At present, in two of the recovery areas that are partly or entirely located within Montana (NCDE and GYE), USFWS has found that grizzly bears have met existing recovery criteria. In 2007 and again in 2017, the USFWS designated the GYE population as a Distinct Population Segment (DPS) for the purpose of delisting, and also delineated a geographic boundary within which this designation applies and within which delisting would occur. Because the delisting rules were vacated in 2007 and 2017, the DPS designation was also

vacated. To delist the NCDE population, the USFWS may similarly designate it as a DPS and delineate a DPS boundary.

Delisting of the GYE and NCDE populations could occur within the time frame typically considered for FWP management plans (generally not less than 10 years), in which case federal oversight of state activities would cease within each of those designated DPS boundaries after a five-year mandatory post-delisting monitoring period during which the USFWS will have an oversight role.

UPDATE: The 2018 “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” map has been replaced with a 2022 version of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” (Figure 3 in both documents). This may also be referred to as “occupied grizzly bear range,” “occupied range,” “occupied habitat,” or “occupied grizzly bear habitat.” All references in the Plan and FEIS have been changed to “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” for consistency.

UPDATE: The 2021 ‘grizzly bears may be present’ map has been replaced with a 2023 version (Figure 4 in both documents).

Definitions

UPDATE: The following definitions of Ecosystems have been altered to include the underlined text (pages 14 in the Plan and 7, 8 in FEIS):

Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem, a geographic area defined by the 1993 USFWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan as the recovery zone plus the larger area surrounding it in which grizzly bears may be anticipated to occur as part of the same population (USFWS 2022, Species Status Assessment).

Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, a geographic area defined by the 1993 USFWS GBRP as the recovery zone plus the larger area surrounding it in which grizzly bears may be anticipated to occur as part of the same population (USFWS 2022, Species Status Assessment).

Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, a geographic area defined by the USFWS GBRP as the recovery zone plus the larger area surrounding it in which grizzly bears may be anticipated to occur as part of the same population (USFWS 2022, Species Status Assessment).

Part II: Issues and Alternatives

Issues identified and considered - Moving bears to initiate new or to support existing populations

ERROR: The action of moving grizzly bears from one population to another to increase the latter’s abundance, genetic diversity, or both is known as augmentation.

CORRECTION: The following statement has been edited: “[t]he USFWS has formally proposed ~~augmentation~~ reintroduction to move bears from other areas into the two established Recovery Zones lacking populations (the Bitterroot, and the North Cascades in Washington State), but implementation of both proposals has been placed on hold.

Alternatives A and B: Orphaned cubs (pages 43, 50 in the Plan and page 57 in the FEIS).

CLARIFICATION: The following underlined text has been added to this sentence for clarity in the description for both alternatives: “[g]enerally, cubs orphaned after September 1 of each year would be left in the wild. Taking younger orphans to MWRC is discouraged by existing policy and must follow MWRC intake guidelines because i) acceptable permanent captive situations are very difficult to find, however FWP has sent young cubs to captive facilities in the past, and ii) re-release into the wild is only permitted with a pre-approved plan and release area, none of which exist currently.

Alternative A: Numerical objectives.

UPDATE: The following sections have been adjusted for clarity with the deleted text struck through and new text underlined (page 40 and 46 of Plan and page 52 of FEIS).

As a signatory to both the GYE CS and the NCDE CS, FWP has committed to the population objectives contained therein, as both a criterion for delisting and as a long-term, post-delisting objective. FWP and partners would manage mortalities from all sources to maintain the population at or above established thresholds, as described in the GYE Conservation Strategy. In the NCDE, FWP has committed to manage mortalities from all sources to support an estimated probability of at least 90% that the grizzly bear population within the [NCDE] DMA remains above 800 bears. Achieving this level of probability translates to about 1,000 bears, at least, in the NCDE DMA. There are no explicit numerical objectives for grizzly bears outside of these two area-specific Conservation Strategies—although for the GYE, the revised Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993) articulates as a “reasonable goal” a minimum of 100 bears.

These objectives are sufficient to assure the demographic sustainability of the two areas but leave uncertainty regarding how bears elsewhere are to be managed. Numerical objectives in the two other USFWS–designated ecosystems partly within Montana are more general. In the GYE, demographic recovery criteria are i) maintaining 6 females with cubs over a running 6–year average both within the recovery zone and within a 10–mile area immediately surrounding it (excluding areas within Canada), ii) 18 of the 22 bear management units occupied by females with young from a running 6–year sum of verified evidence, and that iii) known, human–caused mortality not exceed 4% of the population estimate based on the most recent 3–year sum of females with cubs, of which no more than 30% shall be females”. In the BE, demographic recovery criteria are 14 females with cubs over a running 6–year average, and ii) after at least 90 grizzly bears are established, a mortality limit (known, human–based deaths) of no more than 4% of a minimum population size estimate, with no more than 30% of that being females.

There would be no additional and/or explicit population objectives. However, when compared to the No Action Alternative, FWP would anticipate a higher statewide population of bears because of the objective to maintain a low density of bears in connectivity areas. Grizzly bear monitoring and reporting systems are central to managing healthy grizzly populations. This should include estimating population size and trends, as well as monitoring and reporting vital rates such as adult female survival in core populations. Monitoring range expansion, dispersal events, and grizzly bear presence in connectivity areas may also occur.

At present, FWP is not attempting to estimate numbers of bears between recovery areas, but continues to collect data on observations, which contribute to estimation of the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” and understanding of general trends. FWP has hired several grizzly bear specialist and technicians to work in areas outside of recovery areas to proactively work on conflict prevention and to respond to conflicts if and when they occur.

Alternative A: Grizzly bear distributional objective (pages 41, 46 of Plan and page 52 of the FEIS).

ERROR: Incorrect information.

CORRECTION: No explicit distributional objective has been identified in either existing FWP plans or inter agency Conservation Strategies. The NCDE and GYE CSs and the Recovery Plan outline objectives for occupancy of females with offspring to ensure that grizzly bears are well distributed within core ecosystems. Throughout Montana, no explicit distributional objective has been identified.

Alternative A: Expected consequences if this Alternative is adopted (page 45 of the Plan and page 50 of the FEIS).

ERROR: Use of the word certainty.

CORRECTION: FWP would expect continued uncertainty, both internally and externally, regarding our approach and responses to grizzly bears located in areas not mapped by either of the existing CS documents (Figure 6).

Alternative B: Role of grizzly bears in Montana (pages 5 and 43 of the Plan and page 51 of FEIS).
ERROR: The Plan inadvertently misused the term conservation-reliant stating that “grizzly bears will always require intensive management because the threats they face can never be eliminated, only managed.”

CORRECTION: The following underlined language has been added to the Plan to clarify the meaning of conservation reliant: “Grizzly bears would be seen as a valued part of Montana’s fauna, a species that is both “conservation-reliant” and “conflict-prone”. Conservation-reliant meaning the threats grizzly bears face can never be eliminated, only managed.” A new citation, Goble et al. 2012, has also been added.

Alternative B: Numerical objectives (page 46 of the Plan and page 51 of FEIS)
ERROR: Incorrect information.

CORRECTION (also corrected in Alternative A): The following language has been removed: ~~There are no explicit numerical objectives for grizzly bears outside of these two area-specific Conservation Strategies.~~

Alternative B: Grizzly bear distribution and connectivity (pages 41, 46 of Plan and page 52 of the FEIS).

UPDATE: The NCDE and GYE CSs and the Recovery Plan outline objectives for occupancy of females with offspring to ensure that grizzly bears are well distributed within core ecosystems. Throughout Montana, no explicit distributional objective has been identified.

Alternative B: Human safety

LACK OF CLARITY: The following statement was confusing to some reviewers: “[a]lthough FWP would continue to be limited in its ability to alter grizzly bear behavior or the geographic distribution of populations, it would use available discretion to remove or relocate grizzly bears involved in conflicts with humans, particularly in areas where connectivity among population cores is unlikely.”

CORRECTION: To clear any confusion, the following text has been deleted while the rest of the statement remains: ~~“Although FWP would continue to be limited in its ability to alter grizzly bear behavior or the geographic distribution of populations.”~~

Alternative B: Population research and monitoring (page 50 of the Plan and page 58 of the FEIS).
ERROR: The following statement was missing a word “...if it becomes feasible to estimate grizzly bear abundance or trends in any occupied core areas, FWP would prioritize attempts to do that.”
Reviewers stated that this must be a mistake, and makes sense if the word “BETWEEN” is added to the sentence.

CORRECTION: After reviewing the sentence, FWP agrees that it inadvertently omit 'between,' it now reads: “if it becomes feasible and necessary to estimate grizzly bear abundance or trends in between any occupied core areas, FWP would prioritize attempts to do that.”

Required goal, objectives, and strategies: Commitments made under the two CSs (page 56 in the Plan, and pages 48 and 99 in FEIS).

ERROR: An error describing ARM 12.9.1403 was identified. Specifically, the error included the word 'and' between (b)(ii) and (b)(iii) when it should be an 'or'.

CORRECTION: The following language has been corrected with the underlined: "If mortality thresholds—as outlined in <https://rules.mt.gov/gateway/ruleno.asp?RN=12%2E9%2E1403> for ARM 12.9.1403 (b)(ii) or (b)(iii)—should be exceeded in any given year, then hunting would not be allowed the next year.

Summary of grizzly bear biology

Species and evolutionary history

CLARIFICATION: The following deleted statement was confusing and not fully accurate as written. It has been deleted from the Plan.

The Eurasian brown bear and the North American grizzly are considered the same species (*Ursus arctos*). A number of sub-species are typically recognized within Eurasia (Garshelis 2009), and in earlier days, a number of North American subspecies were also recognized Pasitschniak-Arts (1993). More modern practice has been to accept only 2 subspecies in North America (based on skull analyses by Rausch 1963): the Kodiak subspecies (*U. a. middendorffi*) and all others in North America (*U. a. horribilis*). ~~In the most recently published review of the phylogeography of North American grizzly bears, Miller et al. (2006) recognized only a single extant clade within southern Canada and the U.S. Northern Rockies, and suggested that even the distinction recognized by Rausch (1963) may ultimately not withstand scrutiny, although perhaps the salmon-eating brown bears on the large islands off the Alaska coast might be considered separate (Miller et al. 2006).~~ For purposes of this Plan, we simply refer to grizzly bears, *Ursus arctos*, recognizing that adaptive differences with a genetic component may exist within grizzly bears in the Northern Rockies.

Habitats: Human influences

Highways and crossing structures (page 79 in the plan)

UPDATE: Grizzly bears, particularly males (Chruszcz et al. 2003), are hesitant to cross high-volume highways (Gibeau et al. 2002, Waller and Servheen 2005), and highways generally are known to be a source of considerable mortality for them (Benn and Herrero 2002, Kaczensky et al. 2003). In the past 30 years, within the NCDE area of Montana, grizzly bear fatalities caused by vehicles have been clustered around US Highway 93 in the Mission Valley, US Highway 2 along the southern boundary of Glacier National Park, Highway 83 in the Swan Valley near Condon, Highway 200 between Potomac and Lincoln, and to a lesser extent, along the East Front north of the Teton River (Costello et al. 2020). Sawaya et al. (2013) and Ford et al. (2017) showed that grizzly bears preferred large overpasses to under-highway structures and their use patterns took some time to develop. Females with cubs appear particularly reluctant to use highway crossings, yet solitary grizzly bears and family groups are three and five times, respectively, more likely to use overpasses compared to underpasses when correctly designed (Ford et al. 2017). Adequate fencing is crucial for effectiveness of crossings structures. Rytwinski et al. (2016) found that crossing structures are ineffective at reducing large mammal road mortalities if fences are absent or are too short in length. The Wildlife Crossing Structure Handbook (Federal Highway Administration, 2011) recommends that underpasses are a minimum of 40 feet wide and 15 feet high for grizzly bears.

Population dynamics

Reproduction (page 82 in the Plan)

UPDATE: Grizzly bears in Montana typically mate between May and July, and cubs are born in the den the following winter. Most litters are 1 to 4 cubs, with the average being 2. Male grizzly bears are sexually mature around 4.5 years of age, but larger, dominant males may preclude young adult males from siring many offspring. Reproductive

intervals for females average 3 years (but can be longer or shorter), and animals that lose young before or during the breeding season may come into estrus and breed again that same year. The mean age when females produce their first cubs varies from as young as 4 to as old as 10 years, depending on population. In Montana, the mean has been reported as age 5.8—both in Yellowstone, 1983–2001, (Schwartz et al. 2006b), and in the NCDE (Costello et al. 2016b). The mean age of when females produce their first cubs in the CYE is 6.3 years of age (Kasworm et al. 2021). Offspring typically remain with their mothers for 1 to 3 years before weaning in Montana (most typically at age 2 years), again depending on various factors. Grizzly bears are promiscuous. A male can impregnate multiple females within the same breeding season, while a female can bear offspring from multiple males within the same litter.

Survival (page 82 in the Plan)

NEW INFORMATION: Three cases of Montana grizzly bears infected with highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in the fall of 2022 have raised awareness of this potential source of mortality, but little is known about transmission routes. FWP will continue to test wild mammals that demonstrate symptoms consistent with HPAI infection. It is difficult to comment at this time on the significance of this disease to grizzly bear survival.

Density dependence (page 82 in the Plan)

CLARIFICATION: Documenting density dependence in a long-lived, low-density species is very difficult, so it's not surprising that only long-term studies have done so. That said, it is clear that reproduction and survival in grizzly bears, as in most well studied vertebrates, are negatively associated with population density. Where detailed information is available, relationships with density are indirect, being modulated by nutrition and intra-specific competition and aggression. Litter size has been shown to increase with the mother's access to high quality foods (Hilderbrand et al. 1999b, McLellan 2015), age (Gonzalez et al. 2012), and body condition (Keay et al. 2018); and to decrease with population size or density (Miller et al. 2003, Schwartz et al. 2006b, McLellan 2015). Age at first reproduction has been shown to decrease with resource competition among adult females (Stoen et al. 2006), population size (McLellan 2015, Keay et al. 2018), and to increase with access to high quality foods (McLellan 2015). Number of years between successive cub litters was shown to be negatively related to population density (McLellan 2015, Van Manen et al. 2016) and to access to high quality forage (McLellan 2015). Increasing resource competition and/or population size is associated with older ages of first reproduction (Stoen et al. 2006, McLellan 2015, Keay et al. 2018) and longer intervals between successive litters (McLellan 2015, van Manen et al. 2016). Conversely, increasing access to high quality foods is associated with younger ages of first reproduction and shorter intervals between successive litters (McLellan 2015).

Sidebar 7. Part B of "How many animals are enough?" Two rules of thumb (page 86 of the Plan)

CLARIFICATION: What about the 'G' in OMPG? How long is a generation for grizzly bears? Using methods similar to those used to estimate N_e for Yellowstone grizzly bears, Kamath et al. (2015) estimated a generation to be at about 14 years. The generation interval in the NCDE and CYE population is believed to be 14 years.

Genetics, isolation, connectivity (pages 94 of the Plan)

Concerns about genetic diversity for grizzly bears inhabiting the Cabinet-Yaak area differ qualitatively from those for Yellowstone grizzly bears. Grizzly bears in the CYE are known to be susceptible to deleterious effects of inbreeding because i) the population size is small, and ii) most animals are descended from only a few males. Thus, the short-term effects associated with having an N_e of under 50 are relevant for this population. However, unlike in Yellowstone, Cabinet Mountain Y grizzly bears are genetically indistinguishable from those in the NCDE because of the history of moving bears from the latter into the former. CYE bears have similar population genetics as those in the NCDE because of historic connectivity, as well as the recent augmentation of NCDE bears to the Cabinet Mountains. Thus, if the risk of inbreeding can be overcome, there is, unlike in Yellowstone, no particular concern for loss of alleles, putting the CYE population at risk of inability to respond adaptively to future environmental stresses.

In recent years, some male—and fewer female—grizzly bears from British Columbia population units called Yahk, South Purcell, and South Selkirk, as well as from the U.S. Selkirk and NCDE areas, have been documented as immigrating naturally into the CYE (Proctor 2018, Proctor and Morehouse 2021). However, outside of the three animals from the augmentation program (in the section immediately above), relatively little gene flow into the CY area has been documented (and, as of this writing, none from the NCD or Selkirk areas). Three bears (two males, one female) are known to have immigrated from the Purcell Mountains into the Yaak portion of the CY, producing four cubs. Although contiguous with the Yaak portion of the CY area on the U.S. side, the Yahk grizzly bear population unit in British Columbia is small (estimated in 2005 to be about 20 bears, with a density of approximately 6.5 bears per 1,000 km²), and little movement of females has occurred between it and the adjacent South Purcell unit north of Highway 3 (Proctor and Morehouse 2021). In recent years, some male—and fewer female—grizzly bears from British Columbia population units called Yahk, South Purcell, and South Selkirk, as well as from the U.S. Selkirk and NCDE areas, have been documented as immigrating naturally into the CYE (Proctor 2018, Proctor and Morehouse 2021). However, outside of the five animals from the augmentation program (in the section immediately above), relatively little gene flow into the CY area has been documented (and, as of this writing, none from the NCDE or Selkirk areas). Four bears are known to have immigrated from the Purcell Mountains into the Yaak portion of the CY, producing 14 offspring (Kasworm et al. 2022). Although contiguous with the Yaak portion of the CYE area on the U.S. side, the Yahk grizzly bear population unit in British Columbia is small (estimated in 2005 to be about 20 bears, with a density of approximately 6.5 bears per 1,000 km²), and little movement of females has occurred between it and the adjacent South Purcell unit north of Highway 3 (Proctor and Morehouse 2021).

As of autumn 2022, there is not a population of grizzly bears in the Bitterroot system. However, individual animals have been documented within, or very close to, the Bitterroot system, including from the Cabinet-Yaak, NCDE, and Selkirk Ecosystem (Missoulia 2019, USFWS 2019, Kasworm et al. 2020, Nadeau 2020).

Thus far, apparently these animals have left the area in one of three ways: they have naturally returned to their place of origin; they have been moved by management agencies; or they have been killed by humans. Recent reports continue to suggest that a few individuals may be finding their way to the Bitterroot area. Evidence from GPS collars suggests that male bears are capable of occasionally moving among grizzly bear core areas: A bear originally captured near Whitefish and placed in the Cabinet-Yaak area moved back and forth across Interstate 90 in two successive years, spending a few months during summer 2019 in the Bitterroot mountain range, before ultimately losing its tracking collar in the Whitefish range. However, in order for grizzly bear recovery to occur in the Bitterroot area, additional demographic connectivity from other populations, particularly for female bears who are unlikely to travel as widely as males, will be required. Thus far, apparently these animals have left the area in one of three ways: they have naturally returned to their place of origin; they have been moved by management agencies; or they have been killed by humans. For example, a bear originally captured near Whitefish and placed in the Cabinet-Yaak area moved back and forth across Interstate 90 in two successive years, spending a few months during summer 2019 in the Bitterroot mountain range, before ultimately losing its tracking collar in the Whitefish range. Recent verified observations continue to suggest that a few individuals are present between occupied areas and the Bitterroot area each year. Evidence from GPS collars and genetic parentage of outlier bears suggests that male bears traveled distances greater than those required to move among grizzly bear core areas (Costello and Roberts 2022). However, in order for grizzly bear recovery to occur in the Bitterroot area, additional demographic connectivity from other populations, particularly for female bears who are unlikely to travel as widely as males, will be required.

Distributional objective and population connectivity

UPDATE: Maps (Figures 17 and 18 in the Plan) on modeled population connectivity have been added (Sells et al. 2023).

Figures 19 and 20

Development

CLARIFICATION: Regarding any possible analogies to areas east of the Continental Divide: Again, we excluded those areas due to different conditions (e.g., more livestock and other agricultural attractants) and thus different reasons for grizzly bear mortality. We lack an analogous model to illustrate how, and indeed whether, such source-sink dynamics might play out on Montana lands east of the principal mountain chains, where human attractants and ultimate causes of grizzly bear mortality differ somewhat from those further west.

Interpretation

CLARIFICATION: Figure 16 is for female grizzly bears, while Figure 17 is for males. Both depict Montana (west of the Continental Divide) and show, based on Lamb et al. (2020), extrapolated rates of grizzly bear population growth outside recovery zones. In both, the NCDE and CYE recovery zones are considered sources. In both, the color key is the same: Potential grizzly bear population growth rates, as estimated by applying the Lamb et al. (2020) model to western Montana at the scale of mean female (Figure 19) and male (Figure 20) home range sizes, suggest that some areas (shown in dark blue on both maps) would be capable of sustaining grizzly bears, once colonized, even without additional immigrants. However, other areas (shown in other colors) would likely act as sinks where population persistence would require continuing immigration from source populations such as the NCDE and CYE. White isopleths indicate distances from the presumed source.

Figure labels now read this way:

CLARIFICATION: Figure 19. Estimated potential population growth rate at the spatial scale of the mean female home range size (358 km²), as extrapolated from the Lamb et al. (2020) model. Averaged within female home ranges: Extrapolated rates of population growth, NCDE and CYE

CLARIFICATION: Figure 20. Estimated potential population growth rate at the spatial scale of the mean male home range size (1,364 km²), as extrapolated from the Lamb et al. (2020) model. Averaged within male home ranges: Extrapolated rates of population growth, NCDE and CYE

Conflict Response

ERROR: Subscript 4 from Figure 22 was not included.

CORRECTION: The following text has been added: 4 is when a bear cannot be released on site due to attractants that cannot be removed, human presence, or some other situation making it an unacceptable spot for a grizzly bear at the time.

Moving bears to initiate new or support existing populations (page 115 of Plan).

CLARIFICATION: The following underlined text was added to this statement for clarity: Translocated individuals would be considered experimental² animals, and either moved or euthanized should they cause conflicts with humans [similar to how any other grizzly bear will be managed.] As used here, this term should not be confused with the legal definition of an “experimental population” in ESA 10(j).

² Not to be confused with the legal definition of an “experimental population” in ESA 10(j).

Additional background on issues and alternatives

A potential grizzly bear hunt: functions, expectations, and regulations (pages 123 and 128 of the Plan).

ERROR: The description of permit availability in “Approach 4: Population growth reduction hunt” included an error.

CORRECTION: The following language has been corrected by removing the word ‘not’.
 “Permits would be limited numerically to produce, at maximum, a slow and modest reduction in the underlying rate of growth but would not be constrained by the maximum allowable mortality limits codified in any multi-agency conservation plans.

ERROR: The description of the hypothetical “population growth reduction” lacked two important conservation and management bullets.

CORRECTION: The two following bullets have been added;
 Taking of any bear in a group would be prohibited; and,
 Taking of a bear in a den would be prohibited.

Critiques of science used

Issue 3: Trends in mortalities (page 139 in the Plan).

UPDATE: IGBST has reported that documented and estimated mortalities (including, but not limited to, radio-marked bears) has been lower than estimated ‘limits’ for all years since monitoring began. Critics contend that mortalities have increased markedly in recent years and infer that the population could be in decline as a result. FWP is unable to confirm some of the numbers used in reports that take issue with the IGBST results. FWP’s analysis shows that the number of “TRU” (total reported and unreported, i.e., an estimate of mortalities taking into account those never documented) deaths of male grizzly bears during the 19-year period 2002-2020 increased (at a rate of approximately 1.13 male bears/year, $z = 5.18$, $P < 0.01$), as did the number of mortalities as a proportion of estimates of adult male abundance (at a rate of approximately 0.004 mortality rate/year; $z = 3.76$, $P < 0.01$). However, FWP’s analysis shows that the number of “TRU” mortalities of females has shown no significant change during the 2002-2020 period ($z = 0.77$, $P = 0.44$). Thus, it is not logically inconsistent for mortalities aggregated among both genders to have increased, while density of females has either not changed or increased. It is also consistent with IGBST’s conclusion that male bears have increasingly occupied areas with greater risk while population trajectory (controlled by the female segment of the population) has increased slowly or remained approximately stable. Addition: Critics claim the number of mortalities have increased, possibly to the point of population decline. The IGBST does not dispute that the number of mortalities has increased over time but attribute it to increasing population size. Their vital rate monitoring has shown that survival rates of independent bears have remained stable over time.

Relationship of this plan to federal laws and regulations

ERROR: The following statement is inaccurate: Fourth, in national parks, grizzly bear taking is governed by NPS, rather than USFWS regulations.

CORRECTION: The statement has been deleted as the USFWS has jurisdiction for grizzly bear management in national parks while the bears are federally listed under the ESA.

EIS Process

Note: Most criticism specific to the EIS can be found in the comment letter from Bonnie Rice of the Sierra Club. USFWS identified some technical errors. Few people commented at all about the analysis portion of the EIS. Those who did comment on the EIS most often said it was inadequate because it only analyzed two alternatives.

Alternatives considered

- Some reviewers believe the DEIS is inadequate in its presentation of only two alternatives (see specifics from Sierra Club below). The public has not had the opportunity to comment on other possible alternatives.
- Some reviewers believe the DEIS is inadequate because there is no alternative that analyzes options for connectivity, to include identifying specific areas that would be conserved for connectivity where grizzly bears would not be aggressively managed.
- Some reviewers would have liked to see a detailed analysis of the alternatives not carried forward.

RESPONSE: Alternatives not carried forward for detailed analysis are described in the EIS. The plan builds upon decades of established organization and process (e.g., recovery plan) centered around recovery of core ecosystems where monitoring and management are focused. The preferred alternative recognizes that, and also addresses connectivity between those core ecosystems and management of grizzly bears therein. It also recognizes that applying the level of monitoring and management in the connectivity areas as in the core ecosystem areas is not feasible for a number of reasons, including land uses and management in those areas. Therefore, only two alternatives could be plausibly considered due to their applicability for implementation. The public was provided the opportunity to comment on such possible alternatives to the extent that they were described, as per the requirements stated in MEPA (ARM 12.2.428, et. seq.).

The statewide management plan itself describes overarching management strategies which incorporate a multitude of options available for public input, as described in the Plan and EIS. So, effectively, two alternatives represent the most effective and efficient way to inform the public of the many elements of grizzly management across their range. FWP, as the statutorily obligated wildlife management agency for the state, must be given deference for management direction. Developing an alternative for each and every management element of interest would be inefficient and inappropriate. It would also be difficult and not time-conducive to do a piece-meal evaluation of each management element considered in the overall plan and EIS.

Climate change

- Some reviewers believe the analysis of climate change in the EIS is woefully inadequate.
- Some reviewers believe agencies should be proactively planning for different land management practices under a changing climate scenario.
- Some reviewers believe global climate change is a threat to grizzly bear survival.

RESPONSE:

It is very difficult to predict how climate may change or how such changes may affect wildlife populations and the habitats in which they live. In allocating resources or suggesting regulations, FWP would consider documented habitat variations and data indicating changes in bear behavior as a result, regardless of the cause, FWP would continue to monitor populations as they respond to these variations and would adjust management responses accordingly.

The analysis described includes the best available science relating to climate change and grizzly bear populations. In Montana, impactful land management actions require environmental assessment and public process, in which climate change is addressed and alternatives are considered as necessary or required. FWP cannot determine the extent to which federal agencies adhere to such practices. Accordingly, comments concerning the actions of federal agencies proactively planning for changing climate is outside of the scope of this Plan.

Economics

- Some reviewers believe the Plan does not adequately account for the importance or economic benefit of tourism by people traveling to Montana to see grizzly bears.
- Some reviewers believe the DEIS should have analyzed the economic cost that managing grizzly bears has on managing other predators.

RESPONSE: The following has been added to the FEIS (page 161): Ecotourism focused solely on grizzly bears is difficult to quantify. Visitors rated mountains, Glacier and Yellowstone National Park, rivers, open space, and wildlife as the top six attractions to the state, respectively (Parrish et al. 1997, Dillion and Nickerson 2000). In 2017, nonresident visitors to Montana spent \$3.36 billion, supported 53,380 jobs and contributed to 58% of all dollars in the state. Montana ranks second of western US states in visitor spending per capita, with the travel industry focused in the western half of the state and 40% of vacationers participating in wildlife viewing (Nickerson et al. 2019). Wildlife-viewing is associated with an influx of cash and sales amounts during the third quarter of the year in western Montana, with spending predominately in retail and grocery (41%) and tourism (e.g., restaurants and lodging, 34%; Montana Dept. of Commerce 2021), these quantifications are not species-specific. While grizzly bears are the most highly rated species visitors to YNP would like to see (Duffield et al. 2006), this metric is not associated with a quantifiable economic value.

A rough estimate on the budget to manage grizzly bears is described in “Resources required.” Financial resources relating to conflict prevention and mitigation are described in “Conflict Prevention.” In that section, a link to the Montana Department of Agriculture Livestock Loss Board is provided, and there within are economic costs for compensation.

Tribal Nations

- Some reviewers believe the DEIS falls short of adequately analyzing the relationship between grizzly bears and tribes. The brief analysis includes one quote from Tribal leaders, one link to a letter dismissed, and the numerous other communications opposing delisting and hunting that tribes have submitted.
- Some reviewers believe the DEIS analysis of impacts to tribes contradicts the preamble from the GBAC report: “[m]ontana’s heritage is intimately connected to grizzly bears, and many indigenous peoples have lived with grizzly bears from time immemorial....The Governor’s Grizzly Bear Advisory Council (GBAC or the Council) respects and honors this long-standing relationship, as well as the traditional knowledge that continues to inform management and provide habitat for grizzly bears in Montana.”
- Some reviewers believe the DEIS analysis on Cultural Uniqueness and Diversity underestimates the actual impacts of hunting and the management of grizzly bears outside of core areas to tribes.

RESPONSE: Working with the FWP Tribal Liaison, eight Tribal affiliations were notified of and invited to consult on this Plan and associated EIS: Blackfoot Tribe of the Blackfoot Indian Reservation of Montana, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation, Chippewa Cree Tribe of Rocky Boy’s Reservation, Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Crow Tribe of Crow Indian Reservation, Little Shell Tribe of Chippewa Indians of Montana, and Northern Cheyenne Tribe and Indian Reservation. Additional emails were sent to alert the Tribes and follow-up calls were made later in the comment period. To date, no concerns were communicated by any Tribe.

The FEIS analysis of impacts on physical environment and human environment resources involves all lands within the analysis area, including those within Tribal Nation boundaries. FWP does not anticipate that the impacts on Montanan lands would differ from those on Tribal lands as grizzly

bears do not see borderlines. Further, we understand that management of grizzly bears in Montana may have impacts to Tribal Nations, and vice versa.

We do not feel that we can adequately analyze the relationship between grizzly bears and tribes without direct communication with Tribal Nations. We do not want to speak for them or on their behalf as we respect the relationship between grizzly bears and tribes, and do not want to misrepresent it. Tribal Nations create their own management plans as well as rules and regulations pertaining to the harvest of wildlife species. However, FWP is committed to consulting with relevant tribes in an effort to address objections to a grizzly bear hunting season near reservation boundaries or within other areas of particular tribal concern.

Documents that guided the development of the Plan (the GYE CS documents and cross-references to FWP's Grizzly Bear Management Plan for Southwest Montana; the NCDE CS documents and cross-references to FWP's Grizzly Bear Management Plan for Western Montana) include a Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) between impacted federal, state, and tribal parties to include USFWS, FWP, DNRC (NCDE CS only), BLM, USFS, NPS, USDS APHIS (NCDE CS only), Wyoming Game and Fish Dept (GYE CS only), Idaho Department of Fish and Game (GYE only), Bureau of Indian Affairs (NCDE CS only), Blackfeet Nation (NCDE CS only), and Confederated Salish and Kootenai tribes (NCDE CS only). Under the MOUs, each agency agrees to use their authorities to implement the measures for conservation, monitoring, and cooperation, while respecting statutory responsibilities that differ among each signatory.

These efforts, in nature, recognize the inclusion of Tribal Nations into grizzly bear monitoring and management decisions and demonstrate respect for their long-standing relationship with and traditional knowledge of grizzly bears.

Research and science

- Some reviewers believe FWP contradicts its own human dimensions research findings with statements such as “[m]ost residents of inhabited communities feel that grizzly bears do not belong in a community-that they should only be in remote, public land areas. As a result, many do not feel that they should have to adjust their lifestyle to accommodate and animal they do not feel should be there.”

RESPONSE: This perceived contradiction was clarified by removing the quoted statement.

- Some reviewers questioned whether FWP used the best available science in preparation of the Plan and DEIS.

RESPONSE: FWP uses the best available science, and as a result, methodologies and inputs may change to demonstrate our commitment to use the best available science when implementable. We recognize there is literature that contradicts those cited in the Plan and EIS, which our staff critically considered. Further, results from specific studies do not always apply to all populations, environments, or contexts. The methods and tools used by FWP must also be practically implementable. Consultation with internal bear specialists, research scientists, and wildlife managers, in conjunction with trends in grizzly bear data, guide what is identified as the best available science.

Other topics

- Some reviewers believe this analysis of social mores has no basis and should be deleted.

RESPONSE: MEPA requires a state agency to conduct an environmental review when making decisions or planning activities that may have a significant impact on the human environment. FWP concluded the decision to approve or deny the statewide management plan would be a major state action requiring preparation of a DEIS. MEPA (Title 75, chapter 1, parts 1 through 3, MCA) and its implementing administrative rules (ARM 12.2.428, et seq.) require analysis of physical environment and human population resources, one of which is Social Structures and Mores.

- Some reviewers believe any mention of removing livestock, in particular sheep, from public allotments is misguided.

RESPONSE: Livestock on public allotments are only mentioned in relation to habitat standards in the GYE PCA and is not intended to be generalized as a comment regarding statewide practices. Reducing overlap of grizzly bear suitable and occupied habitat with livestock allotments will minimize predator-livestock conflict and livestock losses. These efforts are opportunistic based on producer willingness and are not mandated or regulated.

Specific comment from Sierra Club on inadequacy of the DEIS and its only two alternatives.

1. The DEIS Does Not Comply with the MEPA Mandate to Analyze a Reasonable Range of Alternatives

As the DEIS for the Draft Plan acknowledges, the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA-MCA 75-1-101 et seq) and its associated Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks MEPA administrative rules (ARM 12.2.428 et seq) require analysis of a reasonable range of alternatives.

MEPA 75-1-201(1)(b)(i)(B)(iv) provides:

“... include in each recommendation or report on proposals for projects, programs, and other major actions of state government significantly affecting the quality of the human environment in Montana a detailed statement on:

(A) the environmental impact of the proposed action;

(8) any adverse effects on Montana’s environment that cannot be avoided if the proposal is implemented;

I alternatives to the proposed action. An analysis of any alternative included in the environmental review must comply with the following criteria:

(I) any alternative proposed must be reasonable, in that the alternative must be achievable under current technology and the alternative must be economically feasible as determined solely by the economic viability for similar projects having similar conditions and physical locations and determined without regard to the economic strength of the specific project sponsor.”

The MEPA Handbook (2021)⁴ illustrates this requirement as follows in the glossary:

“INFORMED DECISIONS – Agency decisions that are made with an understanding of the consequences of the pending decision, an evaluation of a reasonable range of alternatives, and an understanding of public concerns. (p. 64)

PROBLEM SOLVING – A systematic approach by which agencies correctly define the problem, discover the consequences of the pending decision, and fairly consider a reasonable range of alternatives before selecting the final course of action.” (p. 65)

On page 66 of the DEIS, FWP acknowledges the need to examine a reasonable range of alternatives:

“FWP’s alternatives development process was designed to identify a reasonable range of alternatives for detailed analysis in the DEIS.”

Thus, the DEIS is required to examine a reasonable range of alternatives to elucidate options, inform the public of other possible courses of action, and compare and contrast impacts. Nonetheless, the DEIS examines only the proposed action and the no action alternative. This approach fails to meet the letter or the spirit of MEPA and the applicable administrative rules. Sierra Club proposes that a realistic, cost effective and grizzly bear conservation-focused alternative that meets the stated purpose and need must be analyzed. The elements of such an alternative would:

1. *Maximize grizzly conservation in Demographic Management Areas in addition to the “core habitat” of the recovery zones.*
2. *Emphasize preserving freedom of movement of grizzly bears and connectivity through conflict minimization, and strategic management relocations in the May Be Present areas of the state mapped by the FWS and reflected in its June 2022 “May Be Present” map, rather than the “estimated occupied range of grizzly bears” map FWP uses in this Draft Plan, for the most up-to-date science on grizzly bear dispersal and distribution and where bears attempting to connect with other populations must be protected to the highest degree*
3. *Allow expansion of permanently inhabited areas beyond the core recovery area, including but not limited to published suitable denning habitat maps⁵*
4. *Prohibit any hunting of grizzly bears in connectivity areas*
5. *Require hound hunting of black bears and wolf trapping using snares, bait and traps are prohibited everywhere that grizzly bears may be present from March 1st to December 31st*
6. *Require prioritization of conflict prevention over trophy hunting of grizzly bears*
7. *Prohibit killing of bears that are conflict-free in areas that don’t clearly contribute to connectivity between populations*
8. *Eliminate any proposed auction hunt*
9. *Eliminate any proposed population reduction hunt*

Specific comment from Center for Biological Diversity on inadequacy of the DEIS.

As an initial matter, the Center is concerned that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has not complied with the Montana Environmental Policy Act in issuing the Plan. On page 27 of the EIS, Montana states:

The draft plan is written in the context of two existing FWP plans (Management Plan for Grizzly Bears in Western Montana (2006) and Southwest Montana (2013)), years of inter-agency collaboration on grizzly bear conservation, previous state and inter-agency plans, routine interactions with the public during FWP's day-to-day management and research, a human dimensions public attitude survey, internal structured decision-making (SDM) process, and a public advisory committee. These internal and public processes serve to fulfill the scoping requirements of MEPA.

We do not believe that the general processes outlined above are sufficient to fulfill the scoping requirements of MEPA.

Moreover, the Draft Montana Statewide Grizzly Bear Management Plan and EIS fails to adequately consider the best available science and information regarding current status of the Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear population.

RESPONSE to the Sierra Club and Center for Biological Diversity:

As stated in the DEIS, "FWP's alternatives development process was designed to identify a reasonable range of alternatives for detailed analysis in the DEIS." Pursuant to the Montana Environmental Policy Act ("MEPA") § 75-1-201(1)(b)(i)(B)(iv), MCA, "any alternative proposed must be reasonable, in that the alternative must be achievable under current technology and the alternative must be economically feasible as determined solely by the economic viability for similar projects having similar conditions and physical locations and determined without regard to the economic strength of the specific project sponsor." The agency is required to consider only alternatives that are realistic, technologically available, and that represent a course of action that bears a logical relationship to the proposal being evaluated. See ARM 12.2.429(2). Effectively, for the purposes of MEPA, alternatives are different ways to accomplish the same objective as the proposed action. A *reasonable alternative* is one that is practical, technically possible, and economically feasible. Furthermore, a reasonable alternative should fulfill the purpose and need of the proposed action and will address significant and relevant issues. See "A Guide to the Montana Environmental Policy Act, 2021, Hope Stockwell, pg. 37). Alternatives not carried forward for detailed analysis (Chapter 2.5 of the FEIS) were not deemed *reasonable*.

FWP's purpose is to provide management direction for grizzly bears with the State of Montana under the direction of a new, programmatic plan. The preferred alternative of adopting and implementing a statewide plan reflects new biological and social conditions. The preferred alternative also takes advantage of recommendations and perspectives previously provided by the GBAC, which was formed under former Governor of Montana, Steve Bullock, as well as a recently completed survey of Montanan's knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes toward grizzly bears. Therefore, the specific objectives of the proposed action (i.e., purpose and need) are in fact fulfilled by the proposed action. In determining how to best achieve the purpose and need of the Plan, the DEIS considered all *reasonable* alternatives. The Plan reflects existing laws, regulations, and policies, as well as inter-governmental commitments made by FWP and the Commission. The Plan will guide FWP activities consistent with the grizzly bears ESA listed status, but also guides FWP activities should delisting of recovered populations occur in the future.

One such activity is hunting. The hunting of wildlife is a recreational opportunity that FWP and the Commission are obligated to make available to those interested in participating. See § 87-1-217, MCA. Further, to uphold its obligation to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future (§ 87-1-201, MCA), it is imperative FWP maintains healthy populations of all fish and wildlife species and habitats that may be directly or indirectly impacted by grizzly bears. Without the management of grizzly bears, including hunting and trapping as a management strategy for wildlife populations, other species in the community may experience changes in their population dynamics and or modify their behaviors, inadvertently impacting the habitat quality and quantity available to all species. Much of what is listed by the Sierra Club in items 1-9 are already incorporated into the Plan, at least to some extent. It is also important to note that the Plan is non-regulatory. Thus, the Plan assists FWP in making recommendations that the Commission can either agree or disagree with in their rulemaking and season-setting processes.

With respect to scoping, the overall intent of scoping is to provide an opportunity for the public to engage with the agency during the early planning stages of the EIS analysis. Ultimately, it provides an opportunity to gather comments, concerns, and ideas from those who have an interest or who may be affected by the proposed action. IN using the two existing FWP plans (Management Plan for Grizzly Bears in Western Montana (2006) and Southwest Montana (2013) and their respective public processes), years of inter-agency collaboration (e.g., IGBST and IGBC) on grizzly bear conservation (including entities such as USFWS, Wildlife Services, other Game and Fish state agencies), previous state and inter-agency plans (e.g., the NCDE and GYE Conservation Strategies), routine interactions with the public during FWP's day-to-day management and research, a human dimensions public attitude survey (Nesbitt et al. 2020 and 2023), internal structured decision-making (SDM) process, and a public advisory committee (e.g., GBAC), public scoping was thorough and described at length within the plan. We believe we successfully fulfilled the scoping requirements of MEPA (See Purpose and Need section of Part I of the plan).

Lastly, FWP uses the best available science, and as a result, methodologies and inputs may change to demonstrate our commitment to use the best available science when implementable. Grizzly bear populations will continue to be monitored with modern techniques. FWP researchers and biologists have decades of expertise and work with equally experienced scientists within the IGBST, IGBC, and USFWS. Research is ongoing, and the new knowledge that it reveals will be incorporated when appropriate into grizzly bear management.