

Protecting grizzlies while keeping people safe

This past summer I met with area ranchers and others in Augusta, a town of 315 people between the Rocky Mountain Front and Great Falls, to discuss grizzly bears expanding their range beyond the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE).

Across Montana, people are talking about grizzlies. Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service removed the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) population from the Endangered Species List. This reverted management of those bears back to Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho. In its decision, the federal agency noted that the GYE population has grown from as few as 136 grizzlies in 1975, when it was listed, to an estimated minimum of 717 today—far above the federal recovery goal of 500.

Some people worry that GYE grizzlies won't do as well in state hands as under federal protection. Let me lay those concerns to rest.

Removing the GYE population from federal oversight doesn't remove protections for grizzlies. Grizzly bears are still classified as a protected game animal, protected from illegal or indiscriminate killing. As part of delisting conditions, Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, and federal land-management agencies all signed a GYE Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy that ensures a healthy recovered population. The strategy strictly constrains mining, logging, and energy development in a six-million-acre area of the ecosystem containing the highest grizzly densities.

As for grizzly bear hunting, it's true that under state management authority, Montana could create a restricted season. But FWP has no plans to propose hunting any time soon.

The people I met in Augusta are concerned about grizzlies, but from a completely different perspective. They worry about NCDE bears showing up in towns, ranches, and even backyards. Grizzlies expanding east and south from the Front are now spotted in places where they haven't been seen in a century or more.

That represents success for grizzly population restoration. But from the perspective of a ranching family, seeing a bear out by the

swing set isn't cause for celebration. Not that they are anti-grizzly. The people I met in Augusta told me they were glad grizzlies are doing well. But they and others unaccustomed to having bears living where they live worry about their family's safety and livestock. One woman told me she no longer lets her children walk to the local river to fish, as they had for years, because "it's where the grizzlies sleep."

FWP cares about people and we care about grizzlies. Our mission is to be stewards of Montana's wildlife. But we know that wildlife can affect livelihoods and even threaten public safety. We also know that building tolerance for grizzlies among those who have to live with bears is critical in conserving those populations.

If you're concerned about the future of grizzlies in Montana, rest

assured that the Great Bear is in good hands. FWP has a strong track record of managing wildlife, including large carnivores. We maintain healthy and sustainable populations of wolves, mountain lions, and black bears. There's every reason to believe that the grizzly—the very symbol of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks—will be just as well conserved. We're not about to let grizzlies disappear from a state where it remains widely revered, or to even let the population drop anywhere near to where it would again need federal protection.

For those who are concerned about grizzlies living near where you live, I promise this agency will do all it can to ensure your family's safety and help find ways for you and bears to coexist.

For years, we've seen proof in the Seeley-Swan, Flathead Basin, Blackfoot Valley, Whitefish area, and elsewhere in Montana that bears and people can live in the same general areas. It's not easy. Safeguarding families and livestock while ensuring that bears aren't unduly killed requires cooperation, communication, and patience. But the honor of living in one of the few remaining states with healthy grizzly populations makes that effort more than worthwhile.

—**Martha Williams**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Grizzlies are spreading east from the Rocky Mountain Front, causing some people new to living near bears to raise public safety concerns.