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Guest column

## Disconnect between policy, action on grizzly bears

MIKE BADER 42 min ago



Mike Bader

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Bears are out of their dens, spurring another rite of spring: discussions of grizzly bear management. As the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee prepares for its spring meeting, Gov. Steve Bullock names a Citizen Advisory Council and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) decides whether to appeal the court ruling relisting grizzly bears, a serious disconnect between policy and action must be redressed.

For example, the proposed Soldier-Butler Project in the Nine Mile area of the Lolo National Forest illustrates everything that is wrong with the direction of grizzly bear recovery. Located within the FWS designated Nine Mile Demographic Connectivity (DCA) area for grizzly bears, it reveals the counterintuitive actions of wildlife managers.

Demographic connectivity means occupancy by female/cub groups, the most sensitive part of grizzly populations to roads, motorized access, loss of cover and mortality risk. When road densities approach certain levels, bears are disturbed and avoid such areas or become exposed to extreme mortality risks. The purpose of the Nine Mile DCA is to provide secure habitat to facilitate population expansion towards and ultimately into the Selway-Bitterroot region, a major goal of regional grizzly recovery.

That's why Soldier-Butler sticks out like a sore thumb. It proposes mechanical treatments on 7,388 acres, 14 million board feet of commercial timber harvest on 3,000 truckloads, 9.4 miles of temporary road construction, 7 miles of new permanent road construction and reverses a previous decision to decommission 37 miles of roads. This leads to a net gain of 44 miles of roads along with severe reductions in security cover for bears and elk.

Why does the FWS continue to approve projects that are demonstrably harmful to grizzly bears? They previously did this on the East Reservoir Project in the Salish DCA which was enjoined by a federal judge.

At the Yellowstone delisting hearing the court asked, where's the connectivity plan? When a grizzly showed up just outside the Bitterroot Recovery Area the court received its answer. Land managers were apoplectic because they did not have a plan and they panicked, physically moving the bear to the Bob Marshall region. Panic is not a strategy.

Now that DCAs have been designated there is no plan to protect them. Instead the agencies approve activities that defeat their intended function. The weak standard of "no net increase" in road density is violated by adding 44 miles that can't be hidden through shell games. Moreover, the study the agencies cite show the road densities created would increase female/cub mortality risk by as much as 50%. Elk would suffer habitat losses up to 80% and the value of investments for conservation easements such as the one at the confluence of Nine Mile Creek and the Clark Fork River will be reduced.

The Forest Service claims the project is needed to reduce risk to private residences. However, Forest Service fire scientists say the structure protection zone extends no more than 120 feet from structures. The Forest Service is using fire as a scare tactic to justify commercial logging miles from homes. They failed with commercial logging and roadbuilding under the guise of fire protection in the Rattlesnake National Recreation Area. The agency's own scientists have said this one-size-fits-all approach is neither realistic or scientifically justified.

In the rush to prematurely delist and downgrade protections for the grizzly, management agencies are acting as if bears are no longer in need of secure habitat or linkages between sub-populations. This is out of step with current thinking, law and the best scientific information and is a threat to wildlife management in general.

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