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OPINION

## Grizzly protection plan falls far short

Wed., Oct. 3, 2018, 6 a.m.

**Mike Bader**



The judge has ruled. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has once again violated federal law in phase one of its headlong rush to remove Endangered Species Act protection (delisting) for 95 percent of the grizzly bears in the lower 48 states and all but 50 of the grizzly bears in Montana.

While the ruling brings a welcome halt to trophy hunting in Wyoming and Idaho and restores ESA protections in the Yellowstone region pending any appeals, here’s the rub: the bulk of Montana’s grizzly bears, which reside in the Glacier-Bob Marshall region, remain on the chopping block.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is holding hearings and a public comment period on its plans to manage grizzly bears after delisting. Their premise is that only 800 bears are needed for long-term survival, which is more than 200 bears fewer than their current estimate and far less than the 2,500-5,000 bears conservation biologists and geneticists say are required for long-term viability over several hundred years and not just a few generations.

Since none of the remaining grizzly bear sub-regions in the Northern Rockies are geographically large enough to support that number of bears, they must be linked through protected habitats where both female and male grizzly bears can live and breed and pass genetic material amongst the sub-regions.

This need was previously recognized by the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan and the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, which wrote: “To address the issue of habitat fragmentation, the IGBC supports the identification of those areas within and between the major grizzly bear ecosystems where wildlife can live or move between existing large blocks of relatively secure habitat. These areas are called linkage zones. Wildlife habitat conservation and the eventual recovery of listed species such as grizzly bears will require connections between populations.” This letter was signed by the USFWS, FWP and Forest Service. Moreover, USFWS later finalized a recovery plan for the Bitterroot ecosystem based on natural immigration based upon linkages.

Sadly, the agencies have pulled the rug out from under this strategy and replaced it with a new one based on raw politics and anti-science. By proposing delisting for Northern Continental Divide grizzly bears as an isolated population, they are following the same illegal, scientifically deficient strategy of delisting the populations one at a time, stranding the other populations including the Selkirks to certain extinction.

Their methods also overcount bears. For example, as the judge noted at the hearing, grizzly bears born in the core population area that cross beyond an artificial boundary and are subsequently killed, are excluded when calculating population growth trend. Now we’ve learned that females with cubs who are killed are included in calculations showing distribution of female/cub groups. Using “ghost bears” for achievement of recovery goals is bogus and unacceptable.

These math tricks result in unrealistic growth that inflates the population estimate, creating the “surplus” managers seek to exploit through trophy hunting and relaxed habitat protection. This flies in the face of record-high mortality in the NCDE in 2018, including 13 grizzlies killed by automobile and train collisions (quadruple the previous average) and with much of the season to go, including big game hunting seasons.

It’s time for USFWS and FWP to face the music. There are no shortcuts. We need a plan that protects and links all five of the grizzly bear populations in the Northern Rockies region. Let them hear it. The FWP comment period is open

until October 26. Written comment by mail: Grizzly Bear ARM-Wildlife Division, Dept. Fish, Wildlife & Parks, P.O. Box 200701, Helena, MT 59620-0701; by email: fwpgrizzlybeararm@mt.gov

Mike Bader of Missoula began his career as a seasonal ranger in Yellowstone National Park involved in grizzly bear management and research. He is an independent consultant who has been involved in grizzly bear issues since 1982 and has published several professional papers and reports on grizzly bear distribution, habitat, mortality and behavior.

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