

[https://missoulian.com/news/local/grizzly-recovery-faces-cloudy-future/article\\_05f9e7b6-2f55-5902-af5c-eae0dfc471a6.html](https://missoulian.com/news/local/grizzly-recovery-faces-cloudy-future/article_05f9e7b6-2f55-5902-af5c-eae0dfc471a6.html)

[TOPICAL](#) [TOP STORY](#)

## Grizzly recovery faces cloudy future

ROB CHANEY [rchaney@missoulian.com](mailto:rchaney@missoulian.com) Dec 15, 2018 Updated 11 hrs ago



A grizzly bear is seen feeding on a bison carcass near Yellowstone Lake in this contributed photo.

Jim Peaco, National Park Service

Was the bear that dug up earthworms on a Stevensville golf course last October a sign of the end or the beginning of grizzly recovery in Montana?

That question occupied everyone at last week's Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) winter meeting in Missoula after a second attempt to delist grizzlies from Endangered Species Act collapsed in court. But the two-day gathering adjourned without revealing how to answer the court critique or how to deal with new grizzly issues. They range from how to fill grizzly-deprived places like the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness to how to get more than a dozen state and federal agencies to share their bear conflict reports for analysis. That means continued participation from top agency decision-makers, who were in noticeably short supply at the Missoula meeting.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and Department of Justice must decide by Dec. 21 whether to appeal the latest defeat of its Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem delisting. If the federal government doesn't appeal, grizzly managers face several

choices for the future. The direction they pick will say a lot about how the Endangered Species Act handles a high-maintenance animal like *Ursus arctos horribilis*.

“The job of recovering grizzly bears is going to take a lot longer than what they want to take,” Wilderness Watch Director George Nickas said after the meeting. “The committee has always had a single-minded focus on delisting the bears. They’ve tried to change the rules as they went along to make it easier to do that. And they got caught by the court. As a result, they’re paralyzed in the sense of what do we do now?”

Martha Williams, IGBC vice chairwoman and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks director, offered a very different perspective on the road ahead. She acknowledged that everyone must hold their breath until the federal appeal decision is made. But work on improving conditions for grizzlies continues.

“I left the meeting thinking a number of us are definitely energized,” Williams said. “They’re really paying attention to what is the best way forward. We were grappling with how to have challenging conversations and do it transparently, when we’re in litigation.”

A federal court decision last September vacated the FWS rule for delisting about 750 grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Part of the ruling criticized the agency for failing to show how removing protections from bears in one recovery area would affect populations in other areas. That forced the agency to reconsider its plan to delist another approximately 1,000 grizzlies in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) of northwest Montana.

It also left in limbo the fates of four other recovery areas. The Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem in northwest Montana and the Selkirk Ecosystem in northern Idaho each have roughly 50 to 70 grizzlies dependent on trucked-in bears from the NCDE. The North Cascades and Bitterroot Ecosystems have no resident grizzlies, although the former has a transplanting plan under consideration and the latter has one already approved but suspended.

“The judge’s ruling says you have to talk about what happens to those remnant populations,” said Sarah Lundstrum of the National Parks Conservation Association. “The NCDE is the source population for the Selway-Bitterroot and the Cabinet-Yaak, and those bears for the North Cascades have to come from somewhere. Some direction from the IGBC would be helpful. They need to be more than a place-holder at this point.”

The federal government declared grizzlies a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act in 1975. At the time, only a few hundred grizzlies remained in the Lower 48 States. The Fish and Wildlife Service has jurisdiction of the bear, while the IGBC convenes the conglomeration of players with a stake in the bear's recovery. That includes state wildlife agencies, federal land managers like national forest supervisors and Bureau of Land Management officials, Indian tribal governments and academic researchers.

It’s also the place where the general public learns how grizzly conflicts are managed and what’s going on in the six grizzly recovery areas in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and Washington. Last week, that included lots of debate over the Stevensville bear but little clarity over what happens next.

Salmon-Challis National Forest Supervisor Chuck Mark directly asked his IGBC colleagues for advice about allowing that bear from the Northern Continental Divide to remain in the Bitterroot.

“I can’t say I’m walking away with some direction or support,” Mark said of the response he got. “This is not a decision I can make on my own. I’m looking for support from the IGBC. I’m looking for a way forward. It’s been 18 years and the bear just got here. It’s precipitated the discussion.”

Mark referred to a 2000 federal plan to transplant an experimental population of grizzly bears into the Bitterroot Recovery Area region along the Montana-Idaho border. The plan was shelved after Idaho politicians took their objections to the George W. Bush administration, but it was never revoked. It was also never modified to respond to situations like the arrival of a new bear that might want to naturally colonize the area.

“When that Stevensville bear showed up, from a biological perspective it would have been the perfect opportunity to move him farther west (into the Bitterroot Recovery Area),” said Chris Smith of the Wildlife Management Institute and a technical adviser to the IGBC. “But there hasn’t been any discussion about that. And the concern is that taking that action without those discussions would set back grizzly bear conservation.”

In particular, that means addressing the concerns of people like Maggie Nutter, a Sweetgrass rancher highly critical of grizzly recovery efforts. She warned the committee that while it debated places to relocate misplaced grizzlies and proper food storage orders, it also better think about guidelines for how sheriff’s deputies or garbage collectors should stay safe when getting bears out of city parks.

“As you write new rules, think about what you’re saying and how people outside your realm perceive grizzlies,” Nutter said. “Those are not my goals, not my values and not my culture. You need to think about the bigger picture.”

Wyoming and Idaho wildlife agencies scheduled grizzly bear hunting seasons after FWS delisted the bears in 2017. Montana’s FWP opted to wait for the court challenge, which proved prudent. The judge’s ruling forced cancellation of the other states’ hunts this fall.

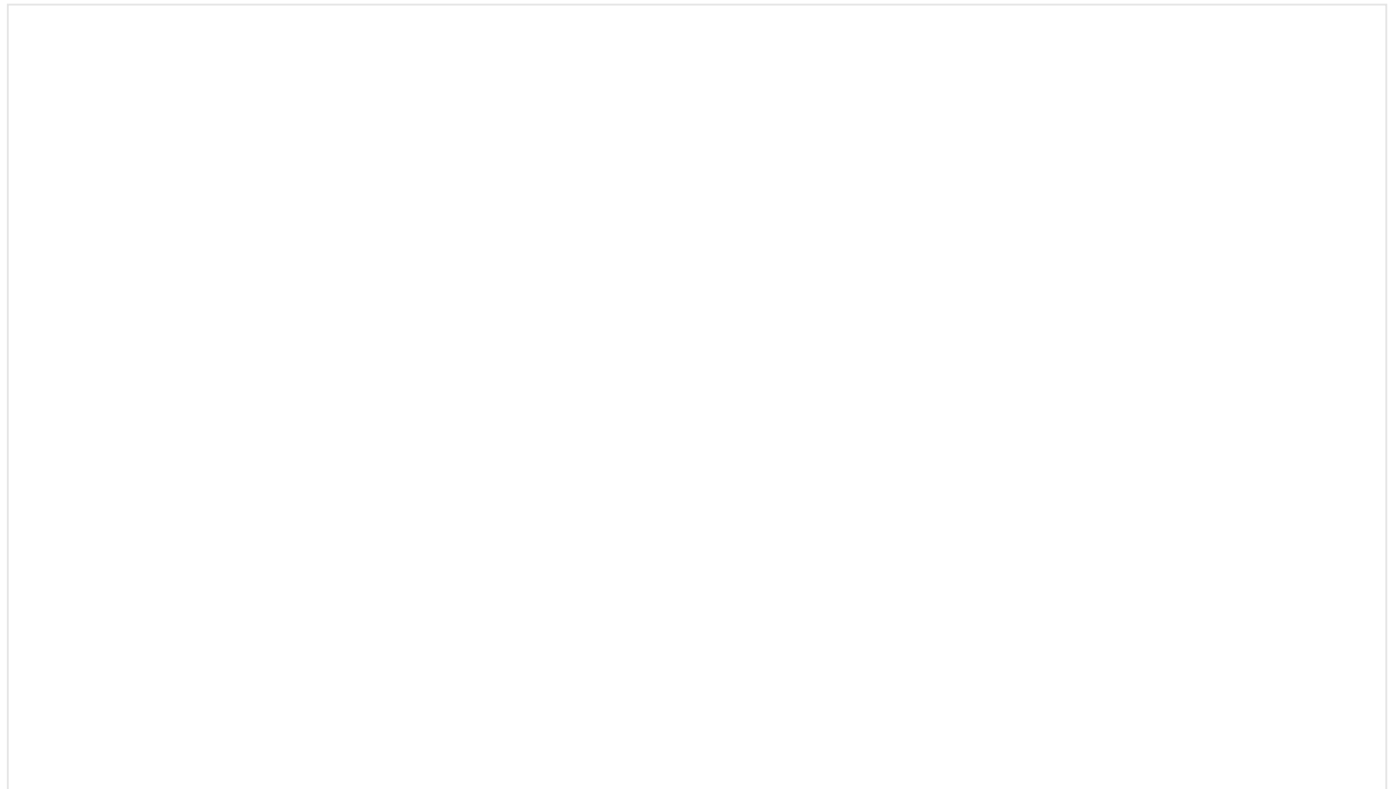
Grizzly bear researcher Sterling Miller spent a career studying grizzly ecology and hunting in Alaska and other parts of the world. He said attention to the hunting seasons may have clouded understanding of the bigger issues at stake.

“Wyoming was ill-advised to proceed as aggressively as they did with their hunting proposal,” Miller said. “I think delisting is a step toward recovery. We’re never going to get bears recovered in any sense similar to how they originally occurred and were distributed. We used to have little islands of human habitation surrounded by sea of habitat for large carnivores. Now we have little islands for those creatures, surrounded by a sea of human-occupied landscapes. The best we can hope for is recovery in isolated, large-as-possible islands.”

Mike Bader insisted a bigger vision was needed. The Missoula-based grizzly population consultant prodded the IGBC to focus on the judge’s concerns about linking the separate recovery areas.

“The basis of linkage is there,” Bader said. “Look at the NCDE, the Bitterroot and Yellowstone — that’s over 1 million acres of wilderness, wilderness study areas and roadless areas. That’s a lot of remote country that a handful of bears could occupy successfully without causing a lot of conflict. Bears exist where people allow them to. The mark of a wise civilization is one that can stay its own hand.”

#### MORE INFORMATION





### DNA in snow reveals hidden wildlife

- Grizzly bear managers ponder Endangered Species Act plans after court setback
- Montana cellphone, Internet infrastructure vulnerable to outages; new funding could help

---

## Rob Chaney

Natural Resources & Environment Reporter

Natural Resources Reporter for The Missoulian.

