

Questions and Answers



Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population Proposed Delisting Rule

Q: Why has the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) determined that the Yellowstone grizzly bear population is recovered?

A: Detailed monitoring reveals Yellowstone grizzly bears are biologically recovered, and with implementation of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (Conservation Strategy), the Service has determined that these bears no longer need federal protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Our determination of recovery is based on a combination of factors including estimated population size, bear distribution throughout the ecosystem, sustainable mortality limits, quantity and quality of habitat, and adequate regulatory mechanisms to ensure that the bear will never again need the protection of the ESA.

Rebounding from as few as 136 grizzly bears when they were listed as Threatened in 1975, today they thrive with a conservative population estimate of more than 700 grizzlies in the GYE. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) Study Team has determined that Yellowstone grizzly bears have more than doubled their range since the mid-1970s and now inhabit more than 22,500 square miles of the GYE. This is an area larger than the states of New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Rhode Island combined. In addition, the population's stability from 2002-2014 and other population trends indicate that the GYE is at or near its carrying capacity for grizzly bears.

Finally, the Service has determined that regulatory mechanisms, including both current and proposed commitments, are adequate to sufficiently minimize the threat to grizzly bears and their habitat and ensure the bears' survival into the future.

Q: Why have bear populations remained steady rather than increasing in the last 12 or so years?

A: According to IGBC Study Team, the number of Yellowstone grizzly bears has remained stable from 2002-2014 because the population is at carrying capacity.

Q: What is the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team?

A: The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee Study Team (Study Team) is made up of scientists and biologists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Forest Service; U.S. Geological Survey; National Park Service; States of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming; and the Eastern Shoshone, Northern Arapaho, and Shoshone Bannock tribal fish and game departments.

The Study Team is responsible for long-term monitoring and research of grizzly bears in the GYE. The team carefully studies population size, numbers of females with cubs, survival rates for all sex and age classes, what they eat, how far they roam and mortality rates.

Q: What types of regulatory mechanisms will be in place for the Yellowstone grizzly bear if it is delisted?

A: A Draft 2016 Conservation Strategy has been developed to guide the management and monitoring of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population and its habitat upon delisting. The draft Conservation Strategy incorporates the proposed state management plans for the Yellowstone grizzly bear and summarizes the coordinated efforts to manage the grizzly bear population and its habitat to ensure continued conservation in the GYE. It will be evaluated by the state, tribal and federal management agencies every five years, or as necessary, and will include a public comment period as part of the updating process.

The draft Conservation Strategy will be published in the *Federal Register*, concurrent with a draft supplement to the 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan for the Yellowstone grizzly bear population, and proposed delisting rule. These three documents can be found online at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/grizzlyBear.php>. The Service is seeking both scientific peer review and public comment on the Conservation Strategy, Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan supplement, and proposed delisting rule.

Q: How is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service considering the importance of connectivity corridors in delisting the Yellowstone grizzly bear population?

A: Federal and state agencies continue to monitor for potential natural connectivity between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) and the GYE. Grizzly bears are currently found approximately halfway between the NCDE and GYE areas and it is likely that these populations will connect in the near future through natural dispersal and movements.

Approaches for increasing the likelihood of natural movement of grizzly bears and genetic interchange between the GYE and the NCDE populations, have been outlined in the Conservation Strategy.

Q: When would hunting begin?

A: If and when a final delisting rule has been published and management of the Yellowstone grizzly bear has become the responsibility of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming and the tribes, these states and tribes would then determine if and when hunting would begin.

Q: Is there a minimum population level at which hunting would stop?

A: The Service and states have agreed that at or below 600 grizzly bears, discretionary mortality would no longer be allowed. Instances of discretionary mortality for human safety are exceptions. Discretionary mortality is human-caused mortality. The goal would be to manage for approximately 674 grizzly bears, the average population from 2002–2014, to ensure a sustainable and resilient population that utilizes all suitable habitat in the GYE. We do not anticipate population numbers to dip to 600 grizzly bears.

Q: How did the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service come up with the target of 674 grizzly bears?

A: The average bear population from 2002–2014, when the population stabilized, is approximately 674 bears. This indicates that the Yellowstone grizzly bear is at or near the ecosystem's long-term carrying capacity and is the approximate population size that we would use as our target for post-delisting management.

Q: When will the final rule be published?

A: The Service anticipates making a final decision on whether to publish a final delisting rule for the Yellowstone grizzly bear population later in 2016. Until that time, the Yellowstone grizzly bear will remain listed as Threatened under the ESA.

Q: What are the steps to the delisting process?

A: Once a population has reached its recovery goals, the Service must assess whether it still needs protection under the ESA based on a five-factor analysis. These five factors are: habitat destruction or modification, overutilization, disease or predation, inadequate regulatory mechanisms, or other factors. If these five factors, both independently and in combination, are found to be not substantial, then a proposed rule to delist is published in the *Federal Register*. Then the Service seeks input from the public, scientific community, federal and state agencies, as well as peer review from at least three experts.

If information and review further support the decision to delist, then a final rule is published in the *Federal Register*. The species is then removed from the Lists of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife. The Service monitors the species for a minimum of five years according to a post-delisting monitoring plan. See more at: www.fws.gov/endangered/what-we-do/recovery-process.html.

Q: What happens after delisting?

A: If the Yellowstone grizzly bear population is delisted, the Service will remain engaged in the conservation of the species. The ESA requires that the Service, in cooperation with the states, monitor the recovered species for a minimum of five years in order to assess the population's ability to sustain itself without the ESA's protective measures. The Conservation Strategy will apply indefinitely to help guide management agencies to assure population recovery is maintained.

If at any time, threats to the species change or unforeseen events change the stability of the population, then the species may be relisted. In addition, any member of the public can petition the Service to relist the species, and the Service will assess that petition on its merits. The Service reviews annual reports provided by the states that track population numbers.

Q: Why is the Service establishing the Yellowstone grizzly bear as a Distinct Population Segment?

A: The Service finds that the Yellowstone grizzly bear population meets the discreteness and significance criteria of our Distinct Population Segment (DPS) policy. Designating the Yellowstone grizzly bear as a DPS allows greater management flexibility for the species. In 1975, the grizzly bear was listed as a Threatened species throughout the lower 48 states and a Recovery Plan was developed. Six Recovery Zones and demographic parameters for grizzly bear populations are identified in the 1993 Recovery Plan with the intent that individual populations would be delisted as they achieve recovery. This delisting only impacts the Yellowstone grizzly bear population; all other grizzly bears in the lower 48 states remain listed.

Q: How is the public able to participate in the planning process?

A: Upon publication of the proposed delisting rule in the *Federal Register*, a 60-day comment period opens. Concurrent with the proposed delisting rule, the Service is also releasing a draft 2016 Conservation Strategy and draft Supplement to the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan with Revised Demographic Criteria for the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem for public comment.

All three documents are available at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/grizzlyBear.php>.

Once the proposed rule publishes in the *Federal Register*, you will be able to submit comments electronically, by U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Comments can be sent via U.S. Mail or hand-delivery to: Public Comments Processing, ATTN: FWS-R6-ES-2016-00xx. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041-3803; or go to <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/grizzlyBear.php>, click on Docket No. FWS-R6-ES-2016-00xx, and follow the instructions for submitting comments electronically.