

Questions and Answers



Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Population Final Delisting Rule

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

A: Detailed monitoring reveals GYE grizzly bears are biologically recovered, and with implementation of the 2016 Conservation Strategy, the Service has determined that these bears no longer need federal protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This decision is based on a combination of factors including estimated population size, distribution of females with young throughout the ecosystem, sustainable mortality limits, quantity and quality of habitat, and adequate regulatory mechanisms to ensure that the bear no longer needs 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 about 700 grizzlies in the GYE. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBST) 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 suggest that the GYE is at or near its capacity to support grizzly bears.

Finally, the Service has determined that existing regulatory mechanisms are adequate to sufficiently minimize the threats to grizzly bears and their habitat and ensure the bears' survival into the future.

Q: How did the Service arrive at the population estimate and how accurate is that estimate?

A: The IGBST annually estimates the population size using a scientific model that is based on observations of unique females with newborn cubs. This method is conservative and underestimates the population by about 40 to 50 percent. The current population level is approximately 700 individuals.

Q: What is the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBST)?

A: The IGBST 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, mortality rates, and many other aspects of grizzly bear ecology.

The IGBST has studied GYE grizzly bear populations since 1973. The study team is made up of scientists and biologists from the U.S. Geological Survey (coordinating agency); U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Forest Service; National Park Service; Idaho Department of Fish and Game; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the

Wyoming Game and Fish Department; and the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Tribal Fish and Game Department.

Q: Why has the GYE bear population remained stable rather than increasing in the last 12 or so years?

A: According to the IGBST, the number of Yellowstone grizzly bears has remained stable from 2002-2014 because the population is approaching the capacity of the ecosystem to support it. There is no evidence of a decline in numbers.

Q: What types of regulatory mechanisms will be in place for the GYE grizzly bear now that it is delisted?

A: The state and federal regulations in the 2016 Conservation Strategy will guide the management and monitoring of the GYE grizzly bear population and its habitat upon delisting. The 2016 Conservation Strategy incorporates the state and federal management plans and regulations for the GYE grizzly bear and summarizes the coordinated efforts to manage the grizzly bear population and its habitat to ensure continued conservation of the GYE grizzly bear. It will be evaluated by 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 2016 Conservation Strategy, the supplement to the 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan for the Yellowstone grizzly bear population, and final delisting rule can be found online at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/grizzlyBear.php>.

Q: How did the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service consider the importance of connectivity corridors in delisting the GYE 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.

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 2016 Conservation Strategy.

Q: How has the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service been conducting tribal consultation?

Since April 2014, the Service has reached out to 53 tribal governments via letters, personal phone calls, emails and webinars to offer an opportunity for government-to-government consultation related to the potential delisting of the Yellowstone grizzly bear. In addition, the Service met with the Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council in Billings, Montana where tribal representatives were also invited to engage in consultation concerning the bear. To date, the Service has conducted 10 government-to-government consultations with tribes regarding this matter.

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

A: The Service and states have agreed that at or below 600 grizzly bears, discretionary mortality (human-caused mortality, including hunting mortality and management removals) would no longer be allowed. Instances of mortality related to human safety would be an exception.

Q: How will the population be managed post delisting?

A: The goal is to manage for grizzly bears in the GYE around the average population from 2002–2014 (approximately 674) to ensure a sustainable and resilient population that utilizes the majority of suitable habitat in the area.

Q: What were the steps to the delisting process?

A: Once a species has reached its recovery goals, the Service must assess its status to determine whether or not it still meets the definition of an endangered or threatened species that still needs protection under the ESA. The assessment considers the following five factors: habitat destruction or modification, overutilization, disease or predation, inadequate regulatory mechanisms, or other factors. If after assessing the status of the species we find that it no longer meets the definitions of an endangered or threatened species, then a proposed rule to delist is published in the *Federal Register* (the Service published a proposed rule for the GYE grizzly bear in March 2016: <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2016/03/11/2016-05167/endangered-and-threatened-wildlife-and-plants-removing-the-greater-yellowstone-ecosystem-population>). 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 List 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 will happen after delisting?

A: 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 2016 Conservation Strategy, which will be managed by the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Coordinating Committee (YGCC), will be in place for the foreseeable future to help guide management agencies to ensure population recovery is maintained. The YGCC is a committee of state, federal, tribal and county agencies charged with implementing the 2016 Conservation Strategy post-delisting. The IGBST will be responsible for scientific monitoring and research of the grizzly bear population.

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

Q: Why did the Service establish the GYE grizzly bear as a Distinct Population Segment?

A: The Service found that the GYE grizzly bear population meets the criteria of our Distinct Population Segment (DPS) policy. Designating the GYE 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 each individual grizzly bear population 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 GYE grizzly bear population; all other grizzly bears in the lower 48 states remain listed.

Q: How was the public able to participate in the delisting process?

A: Upon publication of the proposed delisting rule in the *Federal Register* in March 2016, a 60-day comment period opened. Concurrent with the proposed delisting rule, the Service also released a draft 2016 conservation strategy and draft supplement to the grizzly bear recovery plan with revised demographic criteria for the GYE. The Service reopened the public comment period for 30 days after the agency received peer review and the states finalized their regulatory mechanisms. The Service also held two open houses and public hearings during the initial comment period; one in Cody, Wyoming on April 11th and the other in Bozeman, Montana on April 12th.

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

