

Peer Review Plan: Species Status Assessment for the Grizzly Bear (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) in the Lower-48 States

Timeline of the Peer review (estimated):

Draft documents to be disseminated: August 2023

Peer review to be initiated: August 2023

Peer review to be completed by: September 2023

Determination regarding species' status expected: This Species Status Assessment (SSA) help will inform future agency decisions, including two 12-month findings on petitions from the States of Montana and Wyoming to designate and delist the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly bear populations as Distinct Population Segments (DPS)s, respectively.

About the Peer Review Process:

In accordance with our July 1, 1994, peer review policy (59 FR 34270), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's August 22, 2016, Director's Memo on the Peer Review Process, and the Office of Management and Budget's December 16, 2004, Final Information Quality Bulletin for Peer Review, we will solicit independent scientific reviews of the information contained in our SSA for the Grizzly Bear in the Lower-48 States.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will request peer review from three or more independent experts. To enhance the objectivity of the review, the Science Applications program, rather than the Ecological Services program, will serve as the point-of-contact for the peer reviewers. In 2020, the Service used a contractor to conduct peer review on a previous version of the SSA. The contractor selected 5 peer reviewers. Science Applications will request reviews from these same peer reviewers because this is an updated analysis, and the bulk of the document is unchanged. During the initial peer review process, the Contractor considered the following criteria when selecting reviewers:

- **Expertise:** The reviewer should have knowledge of or experience with grizzly bears or similar species biology.
- **Independence:** The reviewer should not be employed by the Service. Academic, consulting or government scientists should have sufficient independence from the Service if the government supports their work.
- **Objectivity:** The reviewer should be recognized by his or her peers as being objective, open-minded, and thoughtful. In addition, the reviewer should be comfortable sharing his or her knowledge and perspectives and openly identifying his or her knowledge gaps.
- **Conflict of Interest:** The reviewer should not have any financial or other interest that conflicts or that could impair his or her objectivity or create an unfair competitive advantage. If an otherwise qualified reviewer has an unavoidable conflict of interest, the Service may publicly disclose the conflict.

Peer reviewers were selected based on their ability to provide expertise and contribute to a diversity of scientific perspectives relevant to the SSA for the Grizzly Bear in the Lower-48

States. We will not be providing financial compensation to peer reviewers. After completion of the peer review, we will make the peer reviewers' comments and conflict of interest forms available to the public.

Science Applications will provide each peer reviewer with information explaining their role and instructions for fulfilling that role, the draft SSA, and a list of citations, as necessary. The purpose of seeking independent peer review is to ensure use of the best scientific and commercial information available and to maximize the quality, objectivity, utility, and integrity of the information upon which the report is based, as well as to ensure that reviews by recognized experts are incorporated into the SSA process. Peer reviewers will be advised that they are not to provide advice on policy. Rather, they should focus their review on identifying and characterizing scientific uncertainties. Peer reviewers will be asked to answer questions pertaining to the logic of our assumptions, arguments, and conclusions and to provide any other relevant comments, criticisms, or thoughts.

Most of our updates to the SSA are focused in chapters 5, 6, and 7, and are highlighted in track changes. Although peer reviewers are welcome to review the entire document, we are most interested in review of the revised sections. Specific questions put to the reviewers include the following:

1. Does the SSA provide adequate review and analysis of the factors relating to the overall viability of grizzly bears in the lower-48 (e.g., demographics, habitat, disease and predation, and genetics) and, if not, what information is missing and how is it relevant?
2. Does the SSA provide accurate and adequate review and analysis of the current and projected future condition of the species? If not, what information is missing and how is it relevant?
3. Does the SSA provide adequate review and analysis of stressors and other influences on grizzly bears in the lower-48 states? If not, what information is missing and how is it relevant?
4. Are there any significant oversights, omissions, or inconsistencies in our SSA?
5. Are the statements we make about current and future condition logical and supported by the evidence we provide?
6. Did we include all the necessary and pertinent literature to support our assumptions/arguments/conclusions?
7. Are there demonstrable errors of fact or interpretation? Please provide the specifics regarding those particular concerns.

Peer reviewers will provide individual, written responses to Science Applications, who will relay them to the Service. Peer reviewers will be advised that their reviews, including their names and affiliations, will: (1) be included in the decisional record of our determinations regarding this species' status (i.e., final rules or withdrawals); and (2) be available to the public once all reviews are completed. We will summarize and respond to the issues raised by the peer reviewers in the record supporting our recommendations.

About Public Participation

The peer review process will be initiated shortly. We strongly encourage that public comments on the approach of this peer review be submitted by August 1, 2023, in order to allow enough time for processing and consideration. However, we will accept comments on the peer review plan throughout the SSA process.

Contact

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