

ISSUE: Recent press reports that the Yellowstone grizzly population may have been overestimated or that the population may be in decline

Yellowstone Ecosystem

Background:

- Due to new information in the Yellowstone ecosystem, a series of workshops was organized by USGS in 2011 and 2012 to update and evaluate the methods to estimate population size and sustainable mortality rates for Yellowstone grizzly bears. The report on these workshops was produced in September 2012.
- Based on the results of these workshops, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to revise 3 of the demographic standards in the Yellowstone chapter of the Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan.
- These revisions were out for public comment and the comment period closed on June 20, 2013.

Key Points:

- Several environmental groups led by NRDC, CBD, and Earthjustice oppose recovery and delisting of Yellowstone grizzly bears and view the results of the recent workshop and the proposed revisions to the Recovery Plan as a way to foster delisting, so they oppose them.
- NRDC organized and funded a project to produce a report on the methods used to estimate the grizzly population size in the Yellowstone ecosystem via Dr. Dan Doak at the University of Colorado and one of his graduate students. This work resulted in a publication in June 2013 making claims that the existing methods used to count bears could be flawed. They claimed that the population could be smaller than reported and could even be in decline. However, they did not offer an alternative population estimate nor did they state that the existing methods were wrong; just that they could be wrong.
- This recent publication was sent to an AP news reporter by NRDC in mid-June before it was published in a scientific journal. NRDC also arranged a video conference where the lead author presented his results to conservation groups and others prior to publication. Agency scientists learned of this publication via phone calls from this AP reporter after the recent IGBC meeting.
- The existing methods used to count bears have been developed by teams of agency and university scientists, and statistical experts over many years and have been published in several peer-reviewed scientific papers. Several workshops involving experts from agencies and university scientists have been held periodically to subject grizzly population counting methods to intense scrutiny in order to be sure they were correct. The most recent such workshop was concluded in 2012 and the report on this workshop was produced in September 2012.
- At this time, we are carefully evaluating the methods, assumptions, and results in this paper by Dr. Dan Doak. We plan to respond as appropriate and necessary in coordination with all the scientists who have developed the existing methods used to estimate population size. If it is necessary to revise current approaches, this will be done.
- It is important to understand that the agencies have no information or any indication that the grizzly population is smaller than previously known. In fact, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team has conclusively demonstrated that current techniques underestimate population size. Thus, the current population estimate of 718 grizzlies in the Yellowstone ecosystem is conservative. The most recent point estimates of annual population trend indicate a stable to slightly increasing population trend (0-2.2%). Because grizzlies have such low reproductive rates, the 95% confidence intervals on

trend estimates will almost always include the statistical possibility of a declining trend. This is the case for almost every trend estimate for any grizzly/brown bear population, so this is not unique to Yellowstone. In summary, every data set at our disposal indicates the population continues to expand in range (38% range expansion documented between 2004 and 2010) and numbers in the Yellowstone ecosystem.

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