

Grizzly numbers increase: Slow go removing bears from endangered list

By LEW FREEDMAN Staff writer | Posted: Monday, May 4, 2015 2:55 pm

The question of whether the Yellowstone ecosystem grizzly bear will be delisted as an endangered species hovered over last week's two-day Cody meeting of the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee.

While all statistics – from the number of grizzlies set at an estimated 757 to habitat range – point to a recovered species, uncertainty permeated discussions about when action may be taken by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

In addition, tribal representatives took center stage in publicizing disagreements with the subcommittee after it appeared the group was in harmony on the issue.

This YES group – consisting of representatives of about two dozen federal, state, local and tribal agencies – forwarded a statement to Fish & Wildlife about 18 months ago unanimously recommending delisting of the Yellowstone grizzly from the protection of the Endangered Species Act.

Despite delays and little indication from Fish & Wildlife on when it may act, Brian Nesvik, chairman of the subcommittee, remains optimistic.

“The Service has reached out to the states,” Nesvik said of quiet, ongoing talks with Wyoming, Montana and Idaho on how they would manage the bears.

“There is no draft rule out there. There is no final (time line) on doing it. But I think we are close to the Service making a decision.”

At one point James Walks Along, indicating he is the tribal historic preservation officer of the Northern Cheyenne, sought to make a statement about his and other tribes being shut out of the process. However, in a moment of tension, he was ruled out of order and his microphone was unplugged. He was able to speak later during a public comment period.

“We’d like to have a say in this,” said Walks Along, emphasizing the significance of the grizzly bear



Grizzly foraging

A grizzly forages for something to eat at the Sleeping Giant Ski Area along the North Fork Highway in Spring 2013.

in Native American culture.

Some 33 tribes submitted papers that opposed delisting including Rocky Mountain Tribal Leaders Council and the Great Plains Tribal Chairman's Association.

However, from the beginning of YES meetings about eight years ago, Native American tribes, including the Eastern Shoshone, Northern Arapaho, and Shoshone Bannock Tribes, most directly involved with and affected by the Yellowstone grizzly, have seats at the table.

At Thursday's session Walks Along received vocal support.

Leander Watson of the Shoshone Bannock Tribes, read a statement from his council opposing delisting. Cited was opposition to trophy hunting on reservation lands and that delisting bears would "contravene" religious beliefs.

Watson would not elaborate on the statement he read.

Norman Willow Sr. of the Northern Arapaho tribe, said "We don't want delisting of the bear. We have a respect for all animals. You worship and you get the hell out of there."

Nesvik said later the delisting recommendation was sent to Fish & Wildlife with unanimous backing of the membership. On the day of the vote the Native American tribal representatives did not attend the meeting.

"They didn't come," Nesvik said.

In terms of Walks Along's call for inclusion, tribes representing constituencies in places like Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota and elsewhere do not seem to have standing. The YES group's charge is the study of Yellowstone grizzly bears, not all grizzly bears.

Grizzly bears were delisted by Fish & Wildlife in 2007, but opponents sued and in 2009 endangered status was reimposed.

Frustration was expressed during the Holiday Inn session in Cody about the lack of movement by Fish & Wildlife on the issue.

"We could sit here the rest of our lives," said Park County Commissioner Loren Grosskopf, who is a YES member representing local governments.

"We've answered what the appellate court asked for."

1 comment: *GOAL Tribal Coalition* posted at 1:06 am on Tue, May 5, 2015.

Please correct your article. The tribal representative of the Northern Cheyenne is James Walks Along, not Walks Alone.

The presentation after which Mr Walks Along had tried to speak for his people was entitled "Grizzly Bear Management on Tribal Lands", and oh, the irony that he should be prevented from giving a tribal perspective on this subject at that juncture!

The point made in this piece about tribes who are no longer living in or around the Yellowstone area having no right to voice their concerns for sacred grizzly bears is ridiculous. Think! Why are tribes displaced from their sacred lands of Yellowstone? Tribal concern for the grizzly bear is cultural, spiritual, and universal to many tribes across the US (where the grizzly used to roam). Any tribe who has affinity with this four-legged has the right to voice their concerns under the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, and the ESA. There are also two Presidential Executive Orders that also support the tribes' right to have a say in this. And there are 26 tribal nations who the government accedes have ANCESTRAL connection to the territory called Yellowstone.

Unfortunately, the FWS only wrote initially to 4 tribes, not all 26 that they should have contacted, although Chris Servheen did admit on Friday that he had an obligation to contact all 26 and says he has finally written to all 26 tribes. We look forward to seeing copies of these communications, although we wonder if we will have to file FOIA to get them, since none of the tribes are reporting having received said letters.

Mr Walks Along gave formal notice that his tribe requires the consultation process to begin. The Cody Enterprise does not hold the authority to decide who may or may not enter this process, although the article implies only current residents should have any right to an opinion. GOAL Tribal Coalition – currently 33 tribal nations who do not want to see sacred bears delisted and trophy hunted - is comprised of every tribal nation in Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, many in Nebraska and North Dakota, some in Idaho and also Kansas and Oklahoma. The grizzly once roamed all these territories and far beyond, so it is hardly surprising that the tribes have ancestral connection to the grizzly, as well as the land of Yellowstone from which they were displaced.

We look forward to the start of the formal consultation process which will ensure that tribal voices will finally be heard. For a more accurate picture of tribal involvement in this issue, please visit goaltribal.org