

Idaho, Montana, Wyoming & U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Meeting

February 18 & 19, 2015

Denver, CO

Participants:

- Idaho: Virgil Moore, Jeff Gould
- Montana: Jeff Hagener, Ken McDonald
- Wyoming: Scott Talbot, Brian Nesvik
- U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service: Dan Ashe, Bob Dreher, Gary Frazer, Noreen Walsh, Matt Hogan, Mike Thabault, Chris Servheen, Richard Hannan, Hillary Cooley
- USGS: Frank van Manen, Mark Haroldson
- WMI: Chris Smith (facilitator)

Purpose of the meeting: To continue the dialog among the states and FWS regarding delisting of the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear population.

Summary:

Feb. 18 - The meeting began with a presentation by Frank van Manen summarizing the work of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team. The presentation and discussion centered on the methods used for estimating population status and trend, delineation of the Demographic Monitoring Area and implications of using various estimators on the levels of sustainable mortality and management flexibility. Frank circulated a copy of his PowerPoint presentation to participants.

Following Frank's presentation, Chris Servheen provided an overview of the differences between the 2007 recovery criteria, conservation strategy and delisting rule and the current proposed criteria/strategy/rule put on the table by the FWS. Chris circulated copies of his PowerPoint to all participants.

Discussion the first afternoon centered on questions about the various population estimation techniques, whether the revised approach did provide more flexibility and various aspects of population management related to the revised criteria and conservation strategy. Major issues identified included disagreement between the FWS and the states on whether the science presented indicated the population was "stable" or was continuing to increase and whether the Chao2 or MRE techniques represented the best way to estimate population size. The state's perception that the population is continuing to grow is reinforced by anecdotal evidence, data on bear-human conflicts (see below) and public comments. The states also expressed concerns regarding the wider variance associated with the MRE.

Feb. 19 – The meeting began with each of the states providing their perspectives on the status of grizzly bear numbers and issues. Wyoming presented data on bear-human conflicts that demonstrated an increasing trend, driven mainly by increased livestock depredations. The geographic extent of

depredations has expanded over the past 30 years, with major “hot spots” developing in the upper Shoshone and upper Green river drainages within the DMA as well as other areas outside the DMA. Human fatalities have further heightened public concern in WY regarding grizzly bears.

Montana and Idaho have fewer conflicts and less immediate pressure regarding bear management, but Montana expressed concern regarding the potential impact of how issues are resolved in the Yellowstone may affect resolution of similar issues in the NCDE. Idaho identified concerns regarding the extent to which deviations from the 2007 criteria, strategy and rule create greater judicial liability, given past court review of those documents.

Additional discussion focused on the relationship between the recovery criteria, conservation strategy and delisting rule. The group’s common understanding was that the recovery criteria are set by the FWS and define the conditions that must exist to ensure that a species is not in danger of becoming threatened or endangered within the foreseeable future. The conservation strategy is a plan that spells out the management prescription the states and federal land managers will apply to ensure that a recovered species remains recovered. While it is up to the states to determine what commitments they can/will make in a conservation strategy, it is up to the FWS to determine whether or not those commitments are sufficient.

The subsequent discussion began with a review of points of agreement and disagreement between the states and FWS. Points of agreement included:

- It makes sense to use the DMA as the geographic area for the recovery criteria, conservation strategy and delisting rule.
- The Yellowstone grizzly bear population was “recovered” in 2007.
- Management should rely on the best available science to set mortality limits.
- The vital rates of the population within the DMA have changed since the period of rapid growth.
- The FWS proposed application of mortality rates to maintain a “stable” population is not meant to create a “ratchet” effect, where numbers can never be reduced. If a population increases above the level deemed “recovered” after delisting, management can be implemented with the intent to reduce numbers back down to the recovery level.

Areas of disagreement included:

- Whether the available science indicates the population is “stable” or “increasing at a slower rate than prior to 2002”
- Whether the Chao2 or MRE technique provide the better basis for estimating population size for purposes of calculating mortality thresholds, setting the “baseline” number for a recovered population, etc.
- What the management prescription should look like after delisting (e.g. the details of the conservation strategy)
- How any discretionary mortality should be distributed among the states and, possibly, NPS.

Extended discussion led to improved understanding of the various interests and positions of the states and FWS, but no agreement was reached on how to resolve differences between views on the appropriate details of the recovery criteria, conservation strategy and delisting rule. Given the time constraints on this meeting and the need to seek resolution in a timely manner, the group reached agreement on the following next steps and timeline:

- Between now and the North American Conference, the states will work with members of the study team or other technical experts to fully assess the effects of the FWS proposal, develop an alternative management approach, based on the P_{2007} as the baseline, that takes advantage of any difference between numbers today and P_{2007} . In effect, this will involve review and modification of the management prescription laid out in the FWS' proposed changes to the conservation strategy. This process will include an assessment of the use of the Chao2 vs MRE as the basis for setting the P_{2007} .
- The FWS will evaluate alternatives for language used in the 3rd demographic recovery criterion to replace reference to a "stable" population, with reference to maintaining the level of P_{2007} that could be used, if eventual agreement is reached on use of P_{2007} as the "baseline."
- The states will meet at the North American Conference, as necessary, to refine their proposal.
- The states will submit an alternative to the current FWS proposal no later than April 1.
- The states and FWS will meet as soon as possible after April 1 to evaluate the states' proposal, with the goal of reaching consensus on a way forward that allows the FWS to develop a proposed delisting rule by mid-2015, at the latest.