Forest Plan Amendments For Grizzly Bear Habitat Conservation For the Greater Yellowstone National Forests August 2004

How many bears used to be here? How many are there now? How much of their range is occupied?

Prior to European settlement it has been estimated that there were as many as 100,000 grizzly bears throughout the western United States. By 1922 grizzly bears were limited to about 35 small populations scattered among all 11 of the western states except Nevada. At one point when the bear was listed as a threatened species in 1975, about 200 bears were estimated to be in the Greater Yellowstone Area. There are now about 500 to 600 bears in the GYA and the population continues to grow at 3 to 4 percent per year. Another 500 to 600 grizzly bears live in four other ecosystems in Northern Montana, Idaho and Washington. Grizzly bears currently occupy less than 2% of their former range in the western U.S.

What is the PCA? Is it outdated?

The PCA is the Primary Conservation Area for the grizzly bear. It includes a total of 5.9 million acres - an area about twenty percent larger than New Jersey. The PCA includes 3.4 million acres of National Forest System Land, part of Grand Teton National Park and all of Yellowstone National Park. The PCA, also known as the recovery zone, was designated in the early 1980's at a time when about 200 grizzlies were in the Greater Yellowstone Area. This recovery zone was designed to ensure an adequate area for a viable, well-distributed population, and included areas not occupied by bears at that time. The Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee has reviewed the current PCA boundary several times over the last decade and found no compelling reason to expand the boundary. It was recognized in the process of defining the recovery zone/PCA that bears would occur outside the zone and that the mere presence of bears outside the recovery zone would not be sufficient reason for changing the size of the recovery area. Current habitat standards for grizzly bears apply only to the PCA. Under this management scheme bears have met and exceeded population recovery targets. It does not appear that the PCA boundary needs to be expanded or that habitat standards are now required for a larger area than the PCA. Existing Forest Plan direction provides for long-term secure habitat outside the PCA.

Will the proposed plan manage the bears on an island of land that is much smaller than where bears live now? Are grizzly bears living outside the PCA? If so, how many? Is habitat outside the PCA protected? Are we reducing habitat for the grizzly?

The proposed action provides better long-term protection to habitat in the PCA than under current direction by limiting the creation of new developed sites, new roads or the opening of restricted roads. Habitat will be managed for bears in this core area that includes portions of 6 National Forests and Grand Teton National Park and all of Yellowstone National Park for a total of about 6 million acres. National Forest System lands comprise about 58% of the PCA, with 83% identified as secure habitat. This is the same area that has been managed intensively for the grizzly bear over the last several decades.

Yes, bears are living outside the PCA. Bears have expanded their range outside the PCA onto 1.7 million acres managed under existing Forest Plan direction. This equates to about 1/4 of the area occupied by bears in the GYA. Numbers of bears occupying this area outside the PCA are unknown. The management direction for National Forest System Lands outside the PCA will not change under the proposed action. Outside the PCA in areas occupied by bears on National Forest System Lands there are1 million acres of secure habitat. Of this, 3/4 of the secure habitat will be managed under existing Forest Plan direction that would maintain the level secure habitat. These areas do not contain

suitable timber and surface occupancy for oil and gas development is not allowed, such as wilderness, special management areas and other management areas with site-specific restrictions.

Further, in the 6 million acre area outside the PCA that represents currently occupied habitat and habitat that is most likely to be occupied by bears in the future (Alternative 4 area) there are 4.3 million acres of secure habitat. About 80% of this secure habitat would be managed under existing Forest Plan direction such that the secure habitat will be maintained. These areas do not contain suitable timber and surface occupancy for oil and gas development is not allowed, such as wilderness, special management areas and other management areas with site-specific restrictions.

Will there be inbreeding problems? Is there connecting habitat to move into and out of the Yellowstone Ecosystem to maintain genetic variation and sustain healthy populations?

The issue of inbreeding and linkage is fully covered in the Conservation Strategy that came out last year and was subject to public comment. The Forest Service did not propose the genetic management approach to the Yellowstone grizzly population. It was done by an interagency group of bear specialists based on peer-reviewed scientific information published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (Miller and Waits 2003). Current research has noted that the need for gene flow into the Yellowstone population is not urgent. Miller and Waits also noted that if gene flow does not occur naturally within two to three decades, artificial translocation should be conducted. It does not matter how bears get into the ecosystem but rather that they effectively integrate their genes into the population. The data these scientists produced show that there has been only a slight decline in genetic diversity of the Yellowstone grizzlies since the early 1900s, and that the Yellowstone population was not as genetically diverse as that in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem grizzly bear population even as far back as 1910. They concluded (p. 4338, bottom of par. 1) that "...it is likely that gene flow into the Yellowstone ecosystem from the north was historically restricted."

Genetic diversity could be increased by either moving bears in from other ecosystems or by natural migration. Natural migration is currently improbable because much of the land that would serve as a connective corridor is privately owned. The obstacles to achieving natural connectivity are substantial. Movement of bears in or out of the GYA has not been documented. There have been several efforts to model the potential for movement of bears in and out of the GYA. These analyses have identified small areas of potential habitat connected by areas that could serve as corridors of movement. The feasibility of movement between ecosystems in these areas is debatable. Several working groups have been established through the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee to evaluate opportunities to maintain and increase connectivity, where practicable, throughout the northern Rockies. Current studies on linkage by the USFWS to try and provide movement opportunities for grizzly bears and other species to move between Yellowstone and other ecosystems are ongoing and will continue with or without delisting.

What is going on with Whitebark pine? What is the Forest Service doing about it?

Whitebark pine has potential for decline due to the presence of blister rust. Information from west of the Continental Divide in Montana and Idaho indicates that loss of mature whitebark pine has averaged about 39%. Blister rust has had greater impacts in the maritime climates found in northern Idaho and northwestern Montana. Current hypotheses are that the drier climates of the GYE may be relatively inhospitable to the spread of blister rust. Blister rust has been in the GYA since the 1940's and no major die-offs of whitebark pine have been noted.

There have been several efforts in recent years to assesses the health of and improve and restore whitebark across the ecosystem. Management actions include prescribed burning, fire use in wilderness and hand planting of rust resistant whitebark pine. In addition, each Forest and Park within the GYA is collecting seeds that are thought to be genetically resistant to blister rust. Seeds are being grown in a Nursery in Coeur 'd Alene, ID. The Greater Yellowstone Committee has formed a whitebark pine working group to coordinate whitebark pine management and monitoring in the GYA. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team and the Whitebark Pine Working Group are currently working to develop a comprehensive, repeatable, scientifically defendable monitoring program addressing the status and condition of whitebark pine throughout it s range in the GYA. The Conservation Strategy is designed to be receptive to new science and threats to the habitat and populations. Information from monitoring will be evaluated and management direction modified as necessary.

How does logging affect secure habitat? Are there limits on logging?

Only road construction/reconstruction affects secure habitat; removal of the forest canopy does not. Less than 12 percent of the National Forest System Lands in the PCA are suitable for logging (400,000) acres. By comparison the 1988 fires affected approximately 800,000 acres in one year. These burned areas continue to provide habitat for grizzly bears and are occupied by females with cubs. Only a small proportion of the area available for logging would be harvested in any given decade. Logging would fall under the normal restrictions of 40 acre openings for regeneration cutting and all roads would be closed after project completion. Effects on secure habitat from logging under the proposed action would be temporary.

Will the Primary Conservation Area be open to oil and gas leasing?

Energy development would be more restrictive than under present guidelines. Because there are no active oil or gas leases inside the PCA and only 2.8% of the PCA allows surface occupancy, effects would be minimal. Future leases would have additional restrictions because of the limits on changes in secure habitat and developed sites.

Will the bear be de-listed before adequate habitat is protected?

No. The US Fish and Wildlife Service will determine if there is adequate habitat for the bear and whether or not there are adequate regulatory mechanisms in place to ensure the protection of that habitat before delisting the bear. The proposed amendments to the Forest Plans in the GYA are designed to provide protection to the habitat for the grizzly bear when it is delisted.

What science was used to develop the plan?

The Conservation Strategy, which is the basis for the proposed action in the plan, was developed over a 10-year period with design and input from numerous top grizzly bear scientists and specialists. The Interagency team that developed the Strategy was comprised of representatives of the US Geological Survey, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the US Forest Service, the National Park Service and the Game and Fish agencies of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBST) is the lead for conducting grizzly bear research and monitoring efforts in the GYA. Scientific publications and monitoring reports developed by the IGBST and publications by numerous other scientists formed the scientific basis for the development of the Strategy.

Has the Forest Service already chosen Alternative 2 in its draft Environmental Impact Statement?

No, Alternative 2 is the Preferred Alternative. An Alternative will be chosen for implementation when the Final EIS with the Record of Decision is published. At this time the Forest Service is receiving comments.

Is this a Bush Administration proposal?

No. The recovery of the grizzly bear has been a primary goal for the US Forest Service, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, US Geological Survey and the Game and Fish Departments for the states of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana since the species was listed almost thirty years ago. The efforts of these agencies to work together have resulted in a grizzly bear population that has met all recovery targets since 1998. This amendment is part of the inter-agency commitment to meet the national goal of recovering species that are threatened and is based on the overall Conservation Strategy for the grizzly bear in the GYA.

Why not use Alternative 4?

The level of increased benefit to the grizzly bear as compared to the impact on other uses of National Forests under Alternative 4 is being considered and evaluated.

Will the plan undercut many of the bears long-term survival needs?

The amendment is based on the Conservation Strategy that is designed to provide for the long-term survival of the grizzly bear in the GYA. The Forest Service only proposes to manage and monitor habitat on National Forest system Lands; other parts of the Conservation Strategy include population management by the states, and habitat management and monitoring by the National Park Service. The Conservation Strategy uses adaptive management in managing the grizzly bear, and would be changed as needed to sustain a recovered bear population. In addition to the monitoring of habitats identified in the amendment, the Conservation strategy requires population monitoring and monitoring of the status of important grizzly bear foods. An annual monitoring report will be produced by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team and reviewed by the Yellowstone Grizzly Bear Committee.

FACTS

All numbers exclude large lakes > 640 acres and non forest service inholdings except on BT and Custer where private lands were not excluded from some of the data layers

Total acres of National Forest System Lands on 6 GYA National Forests = 12.2 million acres
There are about 43,000 acres of large lakes on the 6 GYA National Forests
There are about 459,000 acres of non forest service inholdings on the 6 GYA National Forests

PCA
5.6 million acres (Rounded to 6 million in media releases)
National Forest System Lands = 3.4 million acres
Total Percent Secure all ownerships = 86%
Percent of National Forest Service System Lands that is secure habitat = 83% (2.85)
Percent of NFSS lands that is secure habitat in MA types 1,2,3 (long-term secure) 72% (2.47)
Percent of secure habitat on NFSS lands that is long-term secure 87%
Percent of secure habitat on NFSS lands that is secure habitat in MA types 4,5,6,8 with no suitable timber and no surface occupancy =

ALT4 area in and out the PCA
9.4 million acres on National Forest System Lands

ALT4 areas outside PCA existing condition not under alt4
6.0 million acres on National Forest System Lands
Percent of National Forest Service System Lands that is secure habitat = 72% (4.3 million acres)
Percent of NFFS lands that is secure habitat in MA types 1,2 3 = 51% (3.06)
Percent of secure habitat on NFSS lands that is long-term secure = 71%
Percent of NFFS lands this is secure habitat in MA types 4,5,6,8 and no suitable timber and no surface occupancy for oil and gas 7% (.43)

Outside PCA
8.8 million acres on National Forest System Lands
Percent of National Forest Service System Lands that is secure habitat = 49% (4.3 million acres)
Percent of NFFS lands that is secure habitat in MA types 1,2 3 (long term secure) = 35% (3.1)
Percent of secure habitat on NFSS lands that is long-term secure = 73%

Areas known to be occupied by grizzly bears outside pca

Total acres outside PCA on NFSS lands = 1,723,000
Percent of National Forest Service System Lands that is secure habitat = 64% (1.1 million acres)
Percent of NFFS lands that is secure habitat in MA types 1,2 3 (long term secure) = 36% (.62)
Percent of secure habitat on NFSS lands that is secure habitat in MA types 4,5,6,8 with no suitable timber and no surface occupancy = 10% (.17)
Percent of secure habitat that is long term secure = 56%

Area occupied by bears (Schwartz)

The media has noted that 1/3 of the bears live outside the pca where we are not proposing habitat protection. Schwartz never says that 1/3 of the bears live outside the pca, but rather says about 1/3 of the distribution of bears that he estimated falls outside the pca. Of the area outside the pca only 2/3 of that area is on National Forest. Or put another way:

23% of the area currently occupied by bears (Schwartz 2002) is outside the PCA on the 6 GYA national forests

Total area occupied by bears (Schwartz 2002) 34,416 sq km (8.5 million acres)
Area occupied by bears outside PCA 11,875 sq km (2.94 million acres)
Area occupied by bears outside PCA on national forest (private inholdings included) 7,950 sq km (1.96 million acres)

Authors: Kim Barber, Dave Cawrse