

Wyoming wildlife official: At least 1,000 grizzlies in Yellowstone region

PINEDALE — Wyoming Game and Fish Department Deputy Director John Emmerich told a state legislative committee last week that although the official population estimate for grizzly bears in the Yellowstone region is 600, he estimated there are at least 1,000.

Emmerich said a more accurate population count is necessary if state officials have any hope of getting the animal removed from the endangered species list. He told the Legislature's Joint Travel, Recreation and Wildlife Committee that when plans and goals for grizzly bear recovery were written, the models and calculations utilized were conservative in order to err on the side of caution.

"To get a fairly tight population estimate would cost about \$12.9 million," Emmerich said.

The funds would pay for an intensive survey involving the collection of grizzly hair at corral traps or rubbing trees throughout the tri-state Yellowstone ecosystem. The hair samples would be subject to DNA analysis, which allows for identification of individual bears.

Such a program would involve many agencies and would be labor intensive, Emmerich said.

However, Emmerich said even a more accurate grizzly bear count likely wouldn't increase the probability that grizzly bears would be removed from the endangered list, because the 2009 court ruling that the animal must remain protected "had nothing to do with the biology of the bear."

Emmerich said Montana federal judge Donald Molloy's decision that grizzlies couldn't be removed from federal protection hinged on his view that there were inadequate regulatory mechanisms in place to ensure their continued survival, and the court's concern over declining whitebark pine, a food source for bears.

"He has set the bar so high, he has made it almost impossible to recover anything, in my personal opinion," Emmerich said.

Emmerich noted that a Game and Fish study team is re-evaluating the criteria currently used in grizzly population modeling in an attempt to get a more realistic population count.

While the outcome won't be known until this fall, Emmerich said he expects that in the end, the population estimate will be 40 to 60 percent higher than the current minimum estimate.

The importance of having a better population estimate isn't for delisting, Emmerich said, "but it will give us a better idea of how many bears can be removed from the population."

Since lethal "take" thresholds are based on the percentage of grizzlies in the population, a 10 percent threshold for removal of problem bears equates to 60 — for a population of 600. To put that into perspective, Game and Fish trapped and either killed or relocated 65 bears last year — more than 10 percent of the current population estimate.

Kim Floyd, executive secretary of the Wyoming AFL-CIO, urged the legislative committee to support the nearly \$13 million research proposal. He also said he's willing to help seek additional funding by approaching interested nonprofit groups.

Floyd said he has "watched this explosion of grizzly bears" and knows that some hunters and recreationalists are turning away from this region because of the thriving grizzly population.

"I wonder how much more the state is going to lose because of this situation," Floyd said, suggesting the money on the research project would be a good investment for the future of bear management.

Committee co-chairman Sen. Bruce Burns, R-Sheridan, said he was "dubious" as to the value of the study in getting grizzlies delisted. He added it would be a hard sale on the floor of the Legislature.

Burns pledged to keep an open mind about the issue, noting he would like to see funding commitments from public agencies and private organizations.

Rep. Allen Jaggi, R-Lyman, said, "There are too many grizzlies," and the bears are not showing any fear of man.

"More people are going to have more conflicts, and probably more people are going to get killed," Jaggi said.

Jaggi also fears continued litigation from groups whose goal is to prevent any hunting of grizzlies.

Game and Fish Director Scott Talbott told the committee that the grizzly bear population continues to increase between 4 and 7 percent per year.

"We continue to document bears from the southern portion of the Wyoming Range and the southern portion of the Wind River Range, and as of this week, we have a grizzly bear on Gooseberry Creek between the Meeteetse rest area and the town of Worland," Talbott said.

"We are committed to the conservation of this species," Talbott added, noting that his agency invested nearly \$2 million last year in grizzly management.

"We feel very, very strongly that grizzly bears should be delisted," Talbott said.

Rep. Kathy Davison, R-Kemmerer, said the committee would spend \$20 million if it thought the study would result in delisting.

But since that's not the case, Davison said, "I don't think it's a good investment right now."

Talbott said state officials have appealed the federal court decision that reinstituted protections for grizzlies to the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, and a decision is expected this fall.