

# Jackson Hole News&Guide

## Pine decline OK for grizzly

Report says bears show resilience, but experts say questions remain before delisting.

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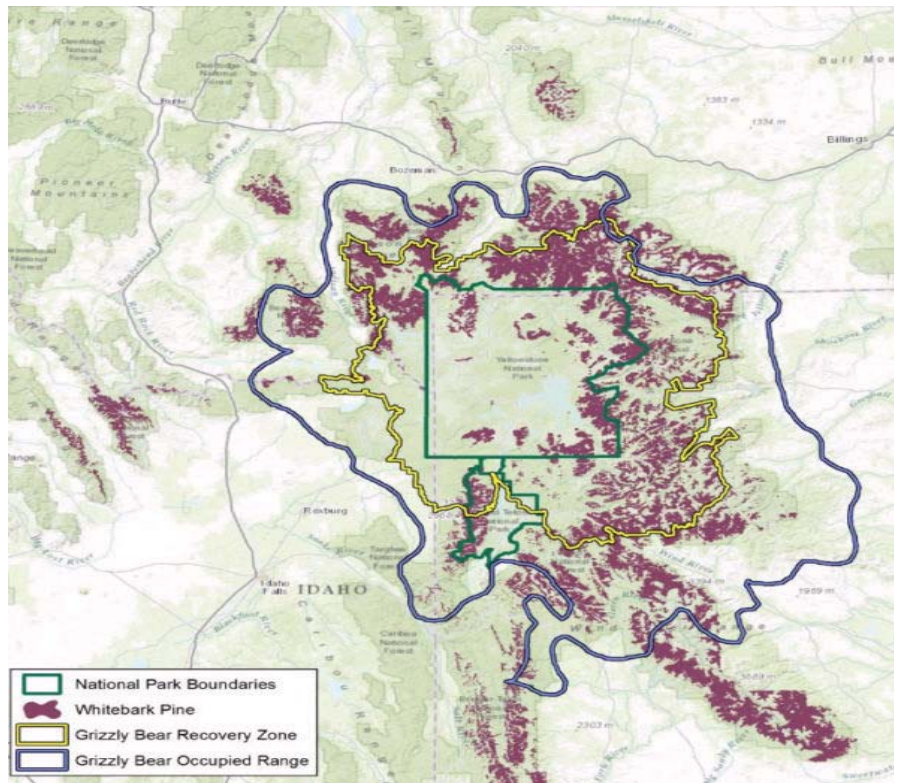
By Mike Koshmrl

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The collapse of whitebark pine, which provide a major fall food source for Yellowstone-area grizzly bears, has not effected grizzly bear individuals or populations, a new federal report concludes.

Next week in Missoula, Mont., the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team will present the results of its long-awaited food synthesis report to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. It's widely anticipated that the committee will use the report as grounds for proceeding to remove Endangered Species Act protection for grizzlies in the ecosystem in 2014.

The study team's final 58-page report, not yet released to the public, was acquired by the Jackson Hole News&Guide on Tuesday. Frank van Manen, leader of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, declined to be interviewed for this story.



INTERAGENCY GRIZZLY BEAR STUDY TEAM/ COURTESY IMAGE Whitebark pine, a major grizzly bear food source, occurs on 14 percent of all the occupied grizzly range in greater Yellowstone. A food synthesis report just completed by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team found that a 75 percent reduction in whitebark numbers since 2002 isn't cause for worry.

“Evidence from the analyses presented here suggests that whitebark pine decline has had no profound negative effects on grizzly bears at the individual or population level,” the report concludes. “The findings of analyses presented here indicate that the Yellowstone grizzly bear population has shown notable resilience in the face of the decline of whitebark pine and natural stochasticity of other food resources

within the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.”

Four years ago a lack of understanding about whitebark pine and grizzlies use of the food caused the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals to prohibit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service from removing grizzly protections.

During bumper crop years, whitebark pine seeds can provide “50 to 80 percent” of grizzly bear diets during fall, the food synthesis said. The seeds are nutritious — 60 percent fat — and as a bonus provide a refuge for the estimated 600 to 800 grizzlies in the ecosystem by luring them to the higher-elevation tree stands and away from people.

The foods study just completed is a response to the 2009 court ruling.

In the report, the Study Team identified and addresses eight research questions, with topics ranging from “animal matter as alternative food sources” to “changing mortality risk due to changing food resources.”

In lieu of whitebark pine seeds, grizzlies have been shifting to meat during the fall, the food synthesis says.

“The findings of these studies suggest that animal matter can serve as an alternative fall food to whitebark pine for grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, consistent with the opportunistic foraging strategies of the species,” the document reads.

One former study team researcher cast doubt on many of the report’s conclusions.

“Putting it all together, we’ve got catastrophic loss of whitebark pine, catastrophic loss of cutthroat trout and major declines in numbers of elk,” said David Mattson, a bear biologist who recently retired from the U.S. Geological Survey. “Army cutworm moths are hanging in there.”

“Of the four major groups of foods, three have experienced catastrophic or major ongoing declines,” Mattson said. “How could you say that the Yellowstone grizzly bear population is doing well if the habitat carpet is being pulled out from underneath it?”

Mattson criticized the food report’s treatment of bear mortality risks associated with shifting from whitebark seeds to other food sources.

Yellowstone’s grizzly population is not at risk of decline because bears are foraging downhill, according to the synthesis.

“Inside the Recovery Zone, where bear survival has historically been linked with whitebark pine cone production, mortality has not increased substantially so effects due to whitebark pine production seem negligible,” the paper says.

Mattson was dubious.

“It’s not just about nutrients,” he said, “it’s about the hazards of using different foods.

“They don’t really deal with that aspect,” Mattson said.

Boar grizzlies kill carcass-foraging cubs, as do wolves, he said.

The bear biologist said there may be a “lag effect” between the decline of food resources and a potential decline of the grizzly population. He questioned whether the study should be used as a basis for recommending to end federal protection of the bruins.

“I look at the evidence that’s available to me, and I don’t see how one could proceed with delisting given the trends that are afoot,” Mattson said.

Grizzly bear conservation advocate Louisa Willcox, with the Center for Biological Diversity in Montana, lamented that the data that went into the food synthesis report was not released to the public.

“The whole push for delisting is based on an iron grip on scientific information that independent scientists don’t have access to,” Willcox said. “That’s a really big problem.”

A request for van Manen, the study team’s leader, to release the data this November was shot down at an Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team meeting for the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee in Bozeman, Mont.

“Our livelihood depends on producing peer-reviewed publications,” van Manen said. “If I had to compete with my own data with other researchers, there is no point in being a researcher. ... If I had to share all the data, those publications, which I am evaluated on, would be gone.”

The data and reports are paid for by taxpayers and ought to be shared, Willcox said.

Mattson shared Willcox’s concerns about there being no exchange of data. Report says bears show resilience, but experts say questions remain before delisting

“Because there’s only one Yellowstone grizzly bear population and one data set, there absolutely has to be free and open access to the data,” he said.

“There is a demonstrably clear bias toward showing that everything is rosy, everything is fine,” Mattson said of the food synthesis report. “I think if I had access to the complete data set, I would come up with different ways of coming to conclusions.”

The Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team will present its food report to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee on Dec. 11 at the Holiday Inn in Missoula, Mont. At 3 p.m. the committee is scheduled to decide whether to develop a rule to delist the Yellowstone grizzly bear population.