

## Grizzly bear comeback? Feds move to delist as a ‘threatened’ species

**Government scientists have recommended that grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area no longer need listing under the Endangered Species Act. But environmentalists warn of a potentially declining bear population tied to climate change.**

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Grizzly bears have become so numerous in and around Yellowstone National Park that state and federal wildlife managers have recommended that the animals no longer be classified as “threatened” under the Endangered Spe

If the US Fish and Wildlife Service accepts the recommendation, the great bears could once again be hunted as game animals in the Yellowstone area. That’s what has happened with



A grizzly bear roams near Beaver Lake in Yellowstone National Park, Wyo. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee voted unanimously Wednesday in favor of delisting grizzly bears in and around Yellowstone National Park, which now protected under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Jim Urquhart/AP

wolves there since they were reintroduced to the northern Rockies in the mid-1990s.

But as with the wolves, which proliferated beyond expectation, forming into new packs and extending their range, the delisting process for grizzlies likely would be long and not without legal and scientific challenge – which is what happened several years ago when another attempt was made to take them off the official “threatened” list.

Environmentalists are pushing back against any delisting that might follow this week’s recommendation by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, which is made up of federal, state, county, and tribal representatives.

“The grizzly bear is arguably the most beautiful and powerful symbol of our wild heritage. It is vital they make a full recovery so they don’t slide back towards extinction,” Bonnie Rice, an official with the Sierra Club chapter in Montana, said in a statement.

The Yellowstone Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Recovery Area covers parts of Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana, including all of Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks.

When grizzlies were first listed as “threatened” under the ESA in 1975, their numbers in the Yellowstone area had dwindled to as few as 136. Today, wildlife agencies report a population of more than 650. As a result, there have been some dangerous encounters between bears and humans, including hikers and ranchers. In August, four people received minor injuries in two separate bear attacks in and near Yellowstone National Park.

In a teleconference organized by the Union of Concerned Scientists Thursday, environmentalists warned of problems with a major part of the grizzly food supply tied to climate change.

This is the sharp decline in energy-rich nuts from high-elevation stands of whitebark pine trees, which have been devastated, scientists say, by the blister rust fungus. Some three-quarters of the mature, cone-producing stands of whitebark stands are dead in the Yellowstone area, the Missoulian newspaper in Montana reports.

“We know the wheels are falling off the wagon in terms of habitat changes in the Yellowstone,” Louisa Willcox of the Center for Biological Diversity told the interagency committee at its meeting Wednesday. “We’re asking you to take a more precautionary approach, in the spirit of the Endangered Species Act.”

In response to a decline in whitebark pine nuts, grizzlies have turned to other sources of food, including elk, bison, and fish, government scientists say.

“The fat levels in bears are the same as they ever were,” Chris Servheen, the US Fish and Wildlife Service’s grizzly-bear recovery coordinator, said at this week’s meeting of the advisory committee. “The bears are adapting ... because they are omnivorous.”

As they did over the years with wolves, state officials have been pushing for grizzly delisting in response to pressure from ranchers and hunters.

“In their desire to please the states, the feds are looking at the bear’s status through rose-colored glasses,” says Ms. Willcox. “We’re already seeing greater bear mortality as a result of conflicts related to bears eating more meat, and even potential declines in the population. Loss of protection will only exacerbate these trends.”

While Willcox and other bear advocates warn of a potential population decline in the number of grizzlies – some of that tied to climate change – government scientists suggest otherwise.

“We have not observed a decline in the Yellowstone grizzly bear population but only a slowing of population growth since the early 2000s, possibly indicating the population is near carrying capacity,” they reported this week.

An initial grizzly bear delisting decision by the US Fish and Wildlife Service is expected next month.

Alaska has an estimated 30,000 grizzlies. Those bears have never been listed as threatened and hundreds are hunted annually.