

## Grizzly bears move closer to possible delisting



A pair of grizzly bear cubs feed on apples Aug. 26 a few miles from the north entrance to Yellowstone National Park in Gardiner, Mont. Alan Rogers | Star-Tribune

By CHRISTINE PETERSON  
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Grizzly bear survival in the greater Yellowstone ecosystem does not depend on the future of whitebark pine cones, according to recent research presented Thursday by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, a group of federal and state researchers.

The finding means grizzly bears could be one step closer to losing federal protections.

Grizzly bears eat more than 200 types of food including biscuitroot, moths and elk. They frequently eat 75 types of foods. That

means when one food source is low, as with whitebark pine cones, they find another to consume, said Frank van Manen, interagency study team leader.

Van Manen presented the results of several studies about bear diet and movements at a Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee meeting in Bozeman, Mont.

The subcommittee voted to give preliminary approval to moving forward on removing the animal from the endangered species list.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took bears off of the list in 2007, but a federal judge put

them back on the list in 2009 citing concerns including the future of whitebark pine cones. An appeals court upheld the judge's whitebark pine worries in 2011. The Fish and Wildlife Service needed more information about how bears would react to the loss of an important food source.

The interagency study team's reports are still in the peer review process. The draft final report will be released Dec. 1.

Reactions to the new information were mixed.

The Wyoming Game and Fish Department supports delisting of the grizzly bear and the recent information only strengthens the agency's position, said Dan Thompson, large carnivore section supervisor for the department.

"The results presented today were fairly unequivocal that any relations to the growth of grizzly bears are related to natural density dependence rather than whitebark pine," he said. "It's always been our goal to have the successful recovery and delisting of the grizzly bear in the Yellowstone ecosystem."

Some conservationists praised the amount of information collected, but also expressed continued concern about the future of the bear.

Chris Colligan, wildlife program manager for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, said the information about bear behavior and diet has been "illuminating." He also said the coalition is focused on reducing grizzly bear and human conflicts, improving genetic connectivity between the Yellowstone area and other bear populations and maintaining good bear habitat in the ecosystem.

"In the long term, we are to ask ourselves what is in the best interest of grizzly bears," he said.

Grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area are a success story, but they need more time before they should be delisted, said Louisa Wilcox, grizzly bear conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity.

She questioned the interagency study team's population estimate including a recent change.

The team reported that 629 bears live in the ecosystem. The team recently updated the number to 741 to adjust for an increase of male bears in the population, van Manen said.

Wilcox wants to see the data used to produce those estimates, as well as the data behind the studies on food.

"Our major concern is what we see as a fast-tracked plan to remove grizzly bears," she said. "The ecosystem from the bear's perspective is coming unraveled, and we're concerned about that."

Other findings from the study include how grizzlies' body weight and fat levels have remained unchanged regardless of production of whitebark pine cones and that bears in the ecosystem are eating more meat, van Manen said.

Instead of eating whitebark pine cones in the fall, bears are turning more toward animals such as bison and elk, he said.

The team also found that the number of grizzly bears in the ecosystem is growing more slowly than it has in the past because there are simply more of them on the landscape sharing the same resources.

The Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee will review the report before making its final recommendation to the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee in mid-December. If the interagency committee decides to recommend delisting, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service could move forward with a delisting proposal as soon as December or early January.

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