

Grizzly bear committee discusses bear population

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Bozeman Daily Chronicle

Fewer human entanglements resulted in a good year for grizzly bears around the greater Yellowstone ecosystem.

On Wednesday, biologists from three states and two national parks presented some good news on grizzly bear conflicts and population estimates during a public meeting of the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee of the regional Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. Around 30 scientists from various agencies and representatives of several environmental groups were in attendance. All made the point that every year is different but this year seemed to be a good one.

Idaho biologist Greg Losinski said it appeared that education efforts were making people more bear-aware, so they were leaving less food out and avoiding potential conflict situations.

Wyoming had the most conflicts – 134 – but biologist

Dan Thompson said that was fewer conflicts than in the past. The biggest problem in Wyoming is livestock damage – Wyoming Game and Fish handled 109 livestock-related complaints, Thompson said. Of the 16 bears deaths they recorded, Wyoming biologists killed nine for management reasons. Seventeen bears were relocated.

Fish, Wildlife & Parks biologist Kevin Frye said Montana recorded 67 conflicts this year. That's more than the 10-year average of 60 but not much more, Frye said. The main issue in Montana appeared to be apples, not garbage, Frye said. Apple trees were responsible for two-thirds of the 23 incidents involving food.

“In more populated areas where trapping isn't recommended, electric fences are probably the best tool we've got going,” Frye said. “I think we had only one actual garbage conflict.” Montana has less of a livestock problem, although there were 14 livestock incidents that were almost equally split between

cattle and sheep. Cars struck two of the five bears killed in Montana.

Only 15 conflicts occurred in Idaho. Yellowstone Park had seven, and Teton Park had none.

With lower mortality, the grizzly bear population did well, in spite of a year when most grizzly bear food supplies were low. Fewer animals died this spring so fewer carcasses were available for bears to plunder, said U.S. Geological Society biologist Mark Haroldson. Lake trout in Yellowstone Lake are still squelching the native cutthroat trout, a favorite bear food. Finally, last fall produced few whitebark pine cones, so mother bears couldn't fatten up on them before entering hibernation.

But it turned out to be a good year for cubs. The IGBC uses aerial surveys to track population size, and this summer, within an area of more than 19,000 square miles in and around Yellowstone National Park, biologists counted 58 females with around two cubs each.

Biologists plug this number into a model to estimate the overall population, which turns out to be 629 grizzly bears. However, the IGBC wants to change the model to reflect a better survival rate of females, based upon measurements of the past decade. Using the new model, this year's population estimate would jump to 741 grizzly bears. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Chris Servheen said he expected the new criteria to be finalized in early 2014.

But not all are in agreement with the assumptions behind the new model, which could have an effect on delisting of the grizzly bear under the Endangered Species Act. Opponents point to a published scientific paper by Daniel F. Doak that questions some of the statistical assumptions of the model.

USGS scientist Frank van Manen told Wednesday's audience that he had submitted a rebuttal to Doak but couldn't discuss it because it was still being reviewed.

Louisa Willcox of the Center for Biological Diversity said her main issue was that the IGBC wouldn't release to the public the data it used to develop the model, so there was no way to verify the choice of criteria.

"Where's the data and why can't we have it?" Willcox said. "The public deserves to know how they got there."