

Grizzly Secrets: How the Trump Administration Keeps the Public in the Dark About Yellowstone's Bears

by LOUISA WILLCOX 9/4/19 <https://www.counterpunch.org/2019/09/04/grizzly-secrets-how-the-trump-administration-keeps-the-public-in-the-dark-about-yellowstones-bears/>

A memo recently leaked from the Trump administration to the Center for Biological Diversity confirmed that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is directing its staff to withhold certain public records about how the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is being implemented. This includes instances where recommendations by career wildlife scientists may have been overridden by political appointees in the Trump administration.

The memo confirms that FWS has already applied this guidance in deliberations related to its 2017 decision to prematurely remove ESA protections for Yellowstone grizzly bears, as well as in the aftermath of a 2018 court order that relisted the population.

Although the ESA requires FWS to make decisions about listed species based on the best available science, too often partisan politics rule the day. This is especially true for the controversial grizzly bear.

Well-heeled industries devoted to exploiting our natural environment have, hand-in-hand with trophy-hunting groups such as the NRA and Safari Club, long agitated to strip [federal](#) grizzly bear protections. They have no better friend than the current occupant of the White House with his “damn the torpedoes” approach to exploiting wildlife and wildlands. The Administration is clearly hiding the ball in its efforts to circumvent the law, science, and dissenting views within the government itself.

Transparency is the lifeblood of a healthy democracy, in contrast to totalitarian regimes such as China that thrive on keeping citizens in the dark. Yet that is happening here, with one of our most iconic and nationally-cherished species.

Citizen watchdogs, including myself, have long worked to ensure transparency and government accountability, often relying on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) to force agencies to disclose the information about decisions that they should make available to the public as a normal part of business.

This memo confirms suspicions that the Trump administration is deliberately hiding information about all sorts of things, including decisions about Yellowstone's grizzlies. During Trump's tenure, colleagues and I have been routinely denied the kind of information that had been previously accessible under both Republican and Democrat administrations.

Of particular concern is FWS' stonewalling of details surrounding skyrocketing grizzly bear deaths that now threaten the hard-fought progress towards [recovery](#). These deaths underscore the need to redouble efforts to reduce conflicts, and raise doubts about the wisdom of delisting. But FWS has been flogged by top officials in the Administration to kill more bears and hasten the institution of a trophy hunt. Not surprisingly, FWS has fallen in line. Admitting to unsustainable and possibly malicious bear deaths could undermine the ideological agenda of removing ESA protections.

Grizzly bear deaths have consistently shattered records since 2015. During the brief interlude in 2017-2018 when grizzlies were off the endangered species list, a shocking 126 grizzlies died, almost all killed by humans, and this out of a population of about 700 bears. Official [data](#) show suspicious spikes in killing right after Judge Christensen banned Wyoming's planned trophy hunt last fall and restored protections. Was poaching involved? And, what can we do to prevent unnecessary deaths?

I sought to learn more about all of this through a FOIA request to FWS. For the first time, the agency replied that it had no detailed information, despite having the legal obligation to monitor the status of grizzlies 5 years after delisting. FWS suggested I ask the states for details. Montana and Idaho denied my requests for details, and instead sent trite and incomplete information that I had already obtained [online](#). Wyoming demanded a prohibitive \$12,000 for the data.

Clearly, government agencies are pursuing a coordinated plan to keep key information from public view. What have they got to hide?

In the past, under FWS' direction, grizzly bear managers have pursued laudable efforts to prevent conflicts while keeping the public informed. As a professional wildlife advocate for 30 years, I collaborated with the government in a number of successful coexistence projects.

FWS is now running away from those policies and programs that prevented grizzlies from winking out in and around Yellowstone — while obscuring the reasons why.

Growth of Yellowstone's grizzly bear population has stalled for nearly 20 years, with death rates on steroids. Losses of key native foods to anthropogenic causes, including climate change, have driven grizzlies to forage more widely, resulting in more conflicts and more dead bears. Yet the government denies that climate change or resulting excessive deaths are a problem—for reasons that reek of political subterfuge.

The public has a right to see how its government makes decisions. Keeping citizens in the dark is how dictators work, not democratic governments.