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Delisting grizzlies

# Bears on the move as delisting plan gets new public comment review

ROB CHANEY [rchaney@missoulian.com](mailto:rchaney@missoulian.com) Updated 8 hrs ago



Thomas D. Mangelsen, for the Independent Record  
In "Grizzlies of Pilgrim Creek,"

Federal plans to delist the grizzly bear from Endangered Species Act protection will get a second round of public comment.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Tuesday announcement follows its release of a peer-review report generally approving its management plan for allowing state management of grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Coincidentally, it also arrives on the heels of reports that Yellowstone grizzlies may be making contact with their fellows in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem north of Missoula.

Montana, Idaho and Wyoming state wildlife managers have all proposed plans for both protecting and hunting Yellowstone grizzly bear populations, assuming they leave federal management. Northern grizzlies are considered a separate population, although they are undergoing a similar delisting process that isn't as far along as the Yellowstone one.

The Yellowstone population holds about 700 grizzlies, while the northern area between Missoula and Glacier National Park has roughly 1000 bears. In July, several credible reports surfaced indicating that at least two grizzlies were roaming the Big Hole Valley – one of several potential linkage zones between the two regions.

"We can't prove it, but we're thinking a big Northern Continental Divide male and a Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem male ran into each other, circled around and had words," Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks regional bear manager Jamie Jonkel said Tuesday. "It's good news, showing that if you provide the avenues, try to work with local communities, and get conservation easements on key properties, they're finding ways to pass right through."

Connectivity matters because the Yellowstone and northern grizzlies remain genetically separate populations, with no evidence of family mingling. Expanding the genetic pool of both groups would improve the bears' survival chances.

However, a few isolated ursine sightings do not replace the extensive management proposals outlined in the FWS delisting documents. The five-person peer review released in June generally supported the agency's proposed rule, revised demographic criteria and draft 2016 conservation strategy.

All five reviewers found the documents scientifically rigorous, although they suggested numerous improvements and clarifications. For example, one reviewer noted that "I find what is described throughout the Proposed Rule as 'habitat management' is more about 'managing human activity' to reduce grizzly bear mortality." That reviewer also objected to the rule's lack of detail on connecting habitat regions.

Grizzly bears have been probing beyond the boundaries of both ecosystems in recent years. Greater Yellowstone bears have been found moving south into the Wind and Green river regions of Wyoming, as well as into the Madison and Centennial valleys of southwest Montana. Northern Continental Divide bears have rambled far into the central grasslands around and beyond Great Falls, and have moved south through the Blackfoot River drainage toward Philipsburg and Georgetown Lake. A few have also probed the Salish, Bitterroot and Sapphire mountains west and south of Missoula.

The extended comment period drew criticism from the national environmental group Defenders of Wildlife. Group president Jamie Rappaport Clark, herself a former director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said her former agency was rushing the process without having all the information it needs.

“We can’t afford to be careless with this species” Clark said in an email. “This is too important a decision to make without a full understanding of the management of bears and their habitat post delisting; there is no reason to rush this process. Grizzly bears are an important icon of our natural history and deserve to thrive on the American landscape far into the future.”

## Have a say on grizzly bear delisting plans

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's new public comment period on plans to delist grizzly bears from Environmental Species Act protection has a 30-day window, which ends on Oct. 7. Comments may be submitted electronically at [regulations.gov](http://regulations.gov). In the Search box, enter the Docket Number for the proposed rule, which is FWS-R6-ES-2016-0042. Then click on the search button.

On the resulting page, writers may enter a comment by clicking on the “Comment Now!” button. Comments will also be accepted at the following address:

Public Comments Processing

Attn: Docket No. FWS-R6-ES-2016-0042

U.S. Fish and Wildlife, MS: BPHC

5275 Leesburg Pike

Falls Church, VA 22041-3803

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## MORE INFORMATION



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**Rob Chaney**





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death

**Photos: These children escaped Boko Haram; Now, they're starving to death**



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