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Frequently Asked Questions: North Cascades Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan – Environmental Impact Statement

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Timeline:

- 1975 – Grizzly bear listed as threatened species, lower 48 states under Endangered Species Act.
- 1980 – Grizzly bear listed as an endangered species by State of Washington.
- 1982 – National Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan approved by FWS; revised in 1993.
- 1983 – Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee established.
- 1991 – 9,800 square miles of North Cascades Ecosystem in Washington State identified as adequate habitat for grizzly bears. Grizzly bears are confirmed in locations from just north of Interstate 90 to the international border.
- 1991 – The decision was made by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee during their winter 1991 meeting to recover grizzly bears in the North Cascades.
- 1993 – Detailed habitat evaluation of the North Cascades Ecosystem published.
- 1997 – North Cascades chapter added to National Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan.
- 2004 – A grizzly bear recovery plan completed for the British Columbia portion of North Cascades Ecosystem.
- 2014 – NPS/FWS begin Environmental Impact Statement on grizzly bear restoration in the North Cascades Ecosystem.
- 2016 – Draft EIS developed.
- 2017 – Draft EIS is released for public comment.

What is an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)?

An EIS is a document that evaluates and discusses potential environmental impacts that would occur as a result of taking an action. An agency must look at the impacts of its proposed action, as well as reasonable alternatives for accomplishing its objective, in this case restoring a self-sustaining grizzly bear population to the U.S. portion of the North Cascades Ecosystem. An analysis of what would happen as a result of taking no action is also required. An EIS must be prepared using the best available data. As part of the process, agencies identify and invite the participation of interested persons. This usually means the opportunity to comment on the scope of the EIS at the beginning of the process and again on the draft EIS before a final EIS is issued. Typically, this includes public meetings during comment periods.

Background on EIS: The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 requires federal agencies to prepare an EIS for major federal actions that significantly affect the quality of the human environment. An EIS is a full disclosure document that details the process through which a project is developed, includes consideration of a range of reasonable alternatives, analyzes the potential impacts resulting from the alternatives, and demonstrates compliance with other applicable environmental laws and executive orders.

How is the public involved in this decision?

There are numerous opportunities for the public to comment and be involved in the process. This EIS will involve the public in the evaluation of alternatives to achieve the goal of grizzly bear recovery in the North Cascades Ecosystem. All comments about the alternatives and their impacts presented in the EIS, as well as alternatives that may not be presented but the public thinks should be considered, will be considered during the EIS process. The federal agencies will respond to these inputs by the public.

What is the ‘No-Action’ Alternative?

Under Alternative A (no action), existing management practices would be followed and no new management actions would be implemented beyond those available at the outset of the grizzly bear restoration planning process. Options for grizzly bear restoration under the no-action alternative would be limited. Management actions would be focused on improved sanitation, poaching control, access management, outreach and educational programs to provide information about grizzly bears and grizzly bear recovery to the public, and research and monitoring to determine grizzly bear population size, distribution, habitat, and home ranges.

What is common to all the action alternatives?

All of the action alternatives:

- Seek to restore a reproducing population of approximately 200 bears through the capture and release of grizzly bears in the NCE
- Involve enhanced public outreach
- Include an option to designate the grizzly bears in the NCE as 10(j) nonessential experimental population under section 10 of the Endangered Species Act. This would establish a regulatory and management framework that would provide managers with increased flexibility, in order to help to ensure grizzly bear restoration does not result in the restriction of other land uses and resource development activities or compromise public safety
- Take management actions in response to human-grizzly bear conflicts based on adherence to Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee guidelines for determining conflict grizzly bear status and for controlling conflict grizzly bears

What are the differences between the alternatives in the draft EIS?

The primary differences are related to the number, age, and sex of grizzly bears released, the rate and location of release, and restoration evaluation.

Alternative B—Ecosystem Evaluation Restoration

- Up to ten grizzly bears would be captured and released initially
- Releases would occur in a single remote site over two consecutive summers
- Grizzly bears would be independent subadults between 2 and 5 years of age that had not reproduced yet and had exhibited no history of human conflict
- 60-80% female; 20-40% male
- Grizzly bears released during the first two years would be monitored for an additional two years.
- Depending on the results, a repeat of the initial release could occur, where an additional ten bears would be released at a single site over two years followed by two additional years of monitoring. Additional grizzly bears could be released periodically, based on the results of monitoring
- Alternative B would be expected to result in the achievement of the restoration goal of approximately 200 grizzly bears within 60-100 years

Alternative C—Incremental Restoration

- Approximately 5 grizzly bears would be captured and released each summer over the course of 5 or more years
- Goal is to establish an initial population of 25 grizzly bears
- Releases would occur in multiple remote sites, located in close proximity to one another in order to facilitate interaction and breeding among grizzly bears released into the ecosystem
- After initial population goal of 25 grizzly bears has been reached, additional bears would likely be released into the ecosystem over time in order to address a variety of factors
- Alternative C would be expected to result in the achievement of the restoration goal of approximately 200 grizzly bears within 60-100 years

Alternative D—Expedited Restoration

- Number of suitable grizzly bears captured in a given summer would be released; would not limit the population goal for the initial restoration phase to 25 animals
- Likely capture and release numbers would be approximately 5 per year
- Capture and release efforts would continue each year as necessary until a combination of release efforts and reproduction results in a population of approximately 200 grizzly bears
- Criteria for age and sex ratios for grizzly bears captured and released would be less restrictive
- Grizzly bears would be released and multiple remote sites
- Alternative D would be expected to result in the achievement of the restoration goal of approximately 200 grizzly bears within 25 years

Does the "preferred alternative" have to be identified in the Draft EIS?

We identify a preferred alternative in a draft EIS if we have one at the time it is released. We have not identified a preferred alternative at this time. Input from the public and agencies is encouraged. All comments received on the draft EIS will be evaluated and considered when identifying the preferred alternative in the final EIS.

What happens during the EIS process?

The EIS process is completed in the following ordered steps: Notice of Intent (NOI), draft EIS, final EIS, and record of decision (ROD).

- The Notice of Intent is published in the Federal Register by the lead federal agency and signals the initiation of the process.
- Scoping, an open process involving the public and other federal, state, tribal, and local agencies, commences immediately to identify the major and important issues for consideration during the process.
- Public involvement and agency coordination continues throughout the entire process.
- The draft EIS provides a detailed description of the proposal, the purpose and need, reasonable alternatives, the affected environment, and presents analysis of the anticipated beneficial and adverse environmental effects of the alternatives.
- Following a formal comment period and analysis of public comments received from the public and other agencies, the final EIS will be developed. The final EIS will address the comments on the draft and identify, based on analysis and comments, the "preferred alternative".
- After the final EIS is complete and issued to the public a 30-day waiting period will begin. Following the waiting period, a record of decision will be signed by the agency (or in this case joint agencies) thereby allowing the selected alternative to be implemented.

What is the North Cascades Ecosystem?

The North Cascades is a large ecosystem in north-central Washington State and south-central British Columbia. The largest area of the ecosystem, about 9,800 square miles, lies in the United States. The British Columbia portion of the ecosystem is 3,800 square miles.

Is the North Cascades Ecosystem all public land?

Ninety-seven percent of the U.S. portion of the North Cascades ecosystem is public land and 3 percent is private.

- North Cascades National Park Service Complex = about 10 percent
- Okanogan-Wenatchee & Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forests = 76 percent
- Other federal lands (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Defense) = 2.6 percent
- State lands = 7.4 percent
- County and municipal = 1 percent

Do grizzly bears live in the North Cascades Ecosystem today?

The most recent confirmed observation of a grizzly bear in the U.S. portion of the ecosystem was in 1996. Efforts during 2010-2012 to locate grizzly bears in the U.S. portion of the ecosystem using barbed wire "corrals" to capture hair samples for DNA identification yielded no confirmed grizzly bears; however due to funding and logistical constraints less than a quarter of the ecosystem could be sampled. There may be a small number of grizzly bears still living in the U.S. portion, but exactly how many is unknown. One grizzly bear has been confirmed during the past 5 years in the British Columbia portion of the Cascades, within 20 miles of the U.S. portion of the North Cascades Ecosystem. This indicates the possibility of "dual citizen" bears living on both sides of the border. Due to the remoteness of the ecosystem, it is highly unlikely that people have observed all of the grizzly bears in the ecosystem.

How will the EIS address the Washington state law that includes the statement that “Grizzly bears shall not be transplanted or introduced into the state.”?

The state law (RCW 77.12.035) only applies to WDFW and does not restrict federal grizzly bear recovery efforts in Washington. The law also directs WDFW to “...fully participate in all discussions and negotiations with federal and state agencies relating to grizzly bear management...” In this way, WDFW’s interests will be represented in the environmental analysis.

What impact would restoration have on other big game populations?

As predators, grizzly bears have the potential to impact prey species in the North Cascades Ecosystem; however, grizzly bears are omnivores that primarily feed on vegetation. Studies indicate that a grizzly bear diet consists of about 90% vegetable and insect matter; however, they scavenge and occasionally prey on game animals in addition to ground dwelling rodents that they actively dig out of dens or burrows. Research has documented the importance of local concentrations of ungulates as a source of protein for grizzly bears (IGBC 1997). In many locations, animal matter may not constitute a major annual diet item, but may be seasonally vital to grizzly bears (Mattson, Blanchard, and Knight 1991; Gunther and Haroldson 1998). Some adult big game animals probably will be taken, are not expected to be a major food source, nor would the level of predation be expected to have an influence on population performance.

Does the grizzly bear EIS address issues in common with the recovery and management of wolves in Washington State?

The grizzly bear EIS evaluates the interplay between grizzly bear and wolf recovery in relation to possible grizzly bear recovery alternatives. Wolves and grizzly bears are very different animals. Wolves are primarily carnivorous, hunt in highly social packs and are more likely to prey on domestic livestock. Grizzly bears in ecosystems similar to the North Cascades rely much more on vegetation, insects, and small mammals. Grizzly bears also tend to avoid areas of human activity.

What impact could this have on ranchers and domestic livestock?

Grizzly bears are omnivores, but primarily feed on vegetation. Studies indicate that a grizzly bear diet consists of about 90% vegetable and insect matter; however, they scavenge and occasionally prey on game animals in addition to ground dwelling rodents that they actively dig out of dens or burrows.

When will grizzly bears be delisted in the Lower 48?

Delisting of the grizzly bear will likely be achieved on a case-by-case basis as recovery targets are met for each population. A status assessment along with a distinct population segment (DPS) determination will need to be made before the FWS can make a final determination on recovery and delisting by population. If the population is considered recovered and meets the definition of a DPS, then a proposed and final rule to delist it would be published in the Federal Register. Delisting is currently being considered, along with comprehensive conservation strategies, for the Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem populations, but no final decision has been made.

What are the factors limiting natural recovery in the North Cascades Ecosystem?

Habitat and population connectivity between the nearest populations in British Columbia and the U.S. portion of North Cascades Ecosystem is increasingly fragmented and grizzly bears face as many, or more, challenges immediately north of the U.S. border as they do to the south. Recovering a sustainable population will likely require active restoration in the U.S. portion of the ecosystem as well as strong cooperative efforts to sustain connectivity with Canada. If left to recover without additional human

intervention, grizzly bears could disappear because individual bears are increasingly isolated and have limited opportunity to breed. Indications are that this is already happening, as confirmed observations have become increasingly rare on both sides of the international border. Natural recovery, however, is one of the options being evaluated through the EIS, using the best available science and information.

What authority do federal agencies have to lead this effort?

As federal land management agencies, the NPS is directly responsible for implementing the Organic Act and FWS is responsible for implementing the Endangered Species Act. These laws, as well as numerous other laws and policies of the United States, direct the agencies to do everything within their power to recover, protect, and preserve grizzly bears as a public trust, to ensure that future generations benefit from the same wildlife resources that we enjoy today.

Is the habitat in the recovery area viable for bear survival?

The North Cascades Grizzly Bear Ecosystem Evaluation, completed in 1991, indicated that the necessary habitat quality, quantity, and security were present to support grizzly bears. Land management practices since then have ensured these parameters are still intact and in some areas, improved. A 2002 Habitat Assessment evaluated motorized access, the availability of undisturbed habitat areas and seasonal habitat values in the NCE, charting a course for optimizing habitat security and availability on federal lands over the long-term. Grizzly bears persisted as an important part of the North Cascades for many millennia. Their decline was not due to inadequate habitat, but to direct killing by people. Thousands of grizzly bears from within and around this ecosystem were killed by the mid-1800s.

Would this recovery effort require visitors to the recovery area to change their behavior?

Black bears already occupy the areas that grizzly bears are expected to be in the future, and much of the human behavior needed to avoid conflict with that species applies to recreation around grizzly bears as well. Learning how to safely recreate in black bear country goes a very long way to learning how to recreate where there are grizzly bears. The national park and national forests are already addressing the high risk elements of human-grizzly bear conflict by increasing awareness of, and/or requiring, proper backcountry food storage and by installing bear resistant garbage disposal systems and food storage lockers in campgrounds in order to reduce human-black bear conflict.

Would trails and roads be closed to protect grizzly bears?

There are thousands of miles of trails traveled safely by millions of people in grizzly bear country in the other recovery areas, such as in the Rocky Mountains. Roads on federal lands within the North Cascades Ecosystem have been managed with grizzly bears in mind since the publication of the recovery plan chapter in 1997. Care has been taken to maintain road systems in a way to ensure secure habitat for bears while meeting the needs of people. None of the alternatives require long-term closures.

How long would it take before there is a recovered population in the NCE?

It is unknown at this time and will be evaluated during the EIS process. However, alternatives developed for a similar EIS process completed for a similarly sized ecosystem in Idaho estimated it would take 50 to 125 years from the time recovery efforts begin to the time a self-sustaining population would be

established. Even if a small number of bears were moved into the ecosystem it would take many decades for a population to grow, and in all likelihood people would see these bears only rarely during the first 10 to 20 years.

How would grizzly bears impact adjacent developed areas?

Most human-grizzly bear conflicts are associated with concentrations of attractants, such as orchards, beehives, livestock boneyards, and cattle and sheep calving areas, within productive bear habitat. These impacts could be mitigated by providing grizzly bear education to farmers and ranchers which includes education on the use of electric fencing and managed boneyards.

Under all action alternatives, release areas would be located away from grazing allotments and all released grizzly bears would be radio-collared and monitored. If a bear frequents an allotment area, FWS and WDFW would work with the USFS and livestock owners to determine the best course of action to minimize opportunity for the bear to interact with livestock. In the event a grizzly bear depredates agriculture or livestock, appropriate IGBC guidelines would be followed.

What would be the impacts of grizzly bears on other predator populations in the recovery area?

Grizzly bears coexist with numerous carnivores in other parts of their range, and while some competition for food is certainly likely, the wildlife impacts of restoring grizzly bears after prolonged absence are largely unknown. It is expected that some black bears would be displaced or even killed by grizzly bears. Grizzly bears and black bears coexist as healthy populations in other recovery areas. Grizzly bears would likely steal food from cougars and wolves, as well as compete for carrion with wolverines and other medium to large carnivores. There is no expectation that predators would flee the area into adjacent human-occupied areas, but rather that species would adjust behaviorally within their range. Human-dominated landscapes are typically much more uncertain to wildlife than are wildlife species-dominated landscapes.

Where can I learn more about efforts on grizzly bear restoration and recovery?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the lead agency on endangered species and their recovery. Information on grizzly bear recovery is available at:

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: <https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/grizzlyBear.php>
- National Park Service: www.nps.gov/noca/grizzly.htm
- Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee: www.igbconline.org/