

Chelan County letter takes swipe at grizzly plan

by Christine Pratt

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WENATCHEE — Important parts of the environmental-impact analysis that backs the feds' interest in reintroducing grizzly bears into the North Cascades ignores current science and is based on outdated facts.

That's the opinion Chelan County Commissioners Doug England, Keith Goehner and Kevin Overbay expressed in a March 13 letter to regional National Park Service officials.

"We believe the DEIS (draft economic-impact statement) is inadequate in several areas and ask that the restoration plan not be implemented and an environmental impact statement not be issued until such concerns are more thoroughly examined and mitigated," the commissioners say in their letter to Karen Taylor-Goodrich, superintendent of the North Cascades National Park Service Complex in Sedro-Woolley.

The letter points to four areas:

- **Forecasted habitat conditions** — The draft impact statement doesn't accurately forecast the capacity of the habitat in the North Cascades to sustain the bears over time, because it's based on zero substantial habitat change for the next 150 years. This defies "current science," which indicates "substantial habitat changes" will occur from man-made events, as well as wildfire, climate change and transportation corridors through the region. These changes could result in shorter hibernation times for grizzlies, the letter says. Reduced soil moisture from declines in rainfall and snowpack could result in lower production of wild huckleberries, a key food source for grizzly and black bears.
- **Faulty assumptions** — The draft economic-impact statement and its underlying studies rely on assumptions on grizzly bear behavior and habitat requirements that make it impossible to allow for an informed

decision. For example, it includes no data about grizzly bear habitat use or population data specific to the North Cascades Ecosystem where the bears would be reintroduced, nor area-specific empirical data about the bears' consumption of salmon, a fish that PUDs, and state and federal agencies have spent millions of dollars over decades to restore.

- **Restoration timeline data lacking** — If humans are to intervene in bear relocation, more precise estimates (through modeling) are needed to determine the best places to relocate the bears, based on habitat availability and carrying capacity, how many bears to relocate, and the number of years needed to achieve recovery goals. “The lack of understanding of where and how to restore (North Cascades) grizzly bears and possible extinction of these reintroduced populations needs to be addressed,” the letter says.
- **Impact on human activity** — The draft environmental-impact statement notes that it's difficult to predict where grizzlies will move once reintroduced. The draft doesn't address dispersal of the bears into communities, nor the bears' potential impact on agriculture, forestry, and fishing, which comprise more than 24 percent of all county employment, and tourism, another major economic driver.

The draft impact statement draws on Chelan County population data from 1990. More current estimates from 2015 show population growth estimates of 75,644 — higher by 20,000 people.

The draft statement includes four alternatives toward grizzly reintroduction. The first would require no human intervention, but allow the bears to wander into the region from Canada on their own. This “Alternative A” is the one favored by county commissioners.

The other three require relocating bears from Montana over two to 25 years to restore as many as 200 grizzlies at cost estimates of \$2 million to \$8.5 million, depending on number of years and number of bears.

Commissioners met with federal officials March 7, Commissioner England said Wednesday. Their concerns, he said, were more extensive than those expressed in the letter. The commission asked for a longer comment period to give them more time to review the 300-page draft statement and its supporting materials, he said.

“We're very much in favor of Option A, which they insist on calling ‘No Action,’ but we insist on calling ‘Natural Action,’” England said. “They say

there's no confirmed population of grizzly bears in that area, so we say there's no hurry."

The National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Wednesday announced the comment period would be extended until April 28. To comment and learn more about the proposal, visit <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/grizzlydeis>. Comments can also be mailed to Superintendent's Office, North Cascades National Park Service Complex, 810 State Route 20, Sedro Woolley, WA 98284.

Park Service spokeswoman Denise Shultz said Wednesday that the federal agencies have received 110,000 public comments. None of them will be posted on the project's website for public review until more than two months after the comment period ends, she said.