

Wyoming grizzly bear update

Trinity Lewis for Tri-State Livestock News

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Sportsmen across Wyoming were excited this spring when a Wyoming wildlife commission voted unanimously to authorize a grizzly bear hunt – the first of its kind in more than forty years with the exception of a test hunt in the early 1990s. Having only been removed from the endangered species list a year prior many were surprised by the promptly approved season.

For livestock producers in the Cowboy State, especially those in the northwestern region where the bulk of the grizzlies reside, the move was one that promised to reduce what to them is considered a gruesome predator.

According to Wyoming rancher and Senator Brian Boner, a member of the Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Committee which oversees the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, "There have officially been 237 depredations, this includes both cattle and sheep losses." He added, "This figure includes only the kills which have been confirmed, so the actual number will be significantly higher." According to the Wyoming Game and Fish's most recent report \$841,528.00 in losses have been reported thus far in 2018 alone. Ranchers in Sublette, Park and Teton counties have attested to experiencing more bear sightings and a higher rate of kills than they've witnessed in the past.

According to water and natural resource attorney Harriet Hageman, an expert on the Endangered Species Act, "There are more reported attacks because there are more bears and only limited options available for controlling them. The Endangered Species Act imposes such draconian penalties (prison time and crippling fines) if someone tries to protect themselves during a bear attack, with pepper spray being almost the only thing that they can use. I recently heard a story where a person refused to shoot an attacking grizzly as he knew that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service would reject his claim of self defense and seek to prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law. That bear seriously injured him."

Boner noted that inside the demographic monitoring area, the boundary within which all demographic criteria for the Yellowstone grizzly bear population are currently monitored and evaluated, there are now officially 717 grizzly bears. "This is an extremely low estimate not only because there are bears outside the DMA, but because the techniques used to count the population are extremely conservative." He said. The 717 number is important because the recovery goal for the grizzly bear when listed in 1975 was 700 bears. At the time of the listing the estimated population was 126 bears. The re-population has been hallmarked as a "remarkable conservation success story."

The Wyoming grizzly bear hunting season would have allowed for 22 bears to be harvested and proponents were hopeful losses would begin to decrease. As fall approached and hunter's names were drawn for the licenses a judge in Missoula, Montana, ruled in favor of a coalition of environmental groups who had brought forth a lawsuit claiming that the grizzly would again face the risk of extinction if hunted. The hunt was more recently completely suspended and the Endangered Species Act status for the grizzly bears in the Yellowstone area population restored.

A statement submitted to Tri – State Livestock News by the directors of ICOW, comprised of cattle producers throughout Wyoming, said:

"The directors of ICOW (Independent Cattlemen of Wyoming) are appalled at the recent ruling by U.S. District Judge Dana Christensen to stop the Wyoming grizzly bear hunt.

"This is clearly a case of a judge allowing political bias to influence his decision. The Fish and Wildlife service had made the decision to turn over control of grizzly bears to three states: Idaho, Montana and Wyoming. Political action groups took it upon themselves to oppose Wyoming Game and Fish's management plan for the grizzly population in Wyoming.

Scientific data has shown that the species is no longer endangered. In the ideological world that the protest groups live in, they cannot see

that our society has moved ahead from one hundred years ago. We have more people today. There are more interactions with wildlife and humans today than there have ever been. Trying to forcefully re-create the setting of bears of a hundred years ago is

impractical and dangerous, both for humans and the bears. This situation is a prime example that proves the Endangered Species Act needs revised so it can no longer be used as a tool by groups with private agendas."

With every story there are two sides and Wyoming Director of External Affairs for The Nature Conservancy, Richard Garrett, explains that bears aren't all bad. "Whether the grizzly represents a problem or an opportunity often depends on how the bear, its numbers and activities relate to individuals. Bears have been a part of Wyoming's ecosystem for thousands of years and for most of that time humans have been trying to coexist with them in ways that protect bears and people. Bears can definitely present significant challenges to ranchers, recreationists and hunters but they also are viewed with wonder by hundreds of thousands (if not millions) of people. Many people travel to our state to enjoy viewing Wyoming's world-class wildlife and contribute meaningfully to our state's \$5.6 billion annual recreation economy." Garrett said.

Garrett added that the grizzlies play an important role in Wyoming's natural ecosystem, "Grizzly bears are an apex predator, one of three in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The other two are wolves and human beings. Apex predators play an important role in achieving balance within an ecosystem. Natural systems are almost always less costly to maintain and more sustainable as a result." Some reports show that the grizzlies are working symbiotically with wolves. The wolves kill for sport and provide a hearty meal for the grizzly's consumption.

Senator Boner thinks the recent rulings are pretty cut-and-dried. "I am convinced that the radical, unscientific decision of an activist federal judge to re-list grizzly bears puts the lives and property of Wyomingites at risk." The recent death of a Jackson hunting guide echoes that argument.

Boner said that members of the Wyoming Legislature are committed to using any authority they have to continue to fight for the safety of Wyoming citizens and their livestock. "The Wyoming Legislature's Travel, Recreation, Wildlife and Cultural Resources Committee will continue to monitor the situation. As state lawmakers, there is very little we can do to directly make changes since these bears are now under federal protection. Moving forward, I am thankful we have an administration in Washington that is willing to listen to our concerns and possibly address them. The Wyoming Game and Fish Department will continue to manage this problem with the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Bears which pose a threat to human lives and property will continue to be relocated or euthanized."

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