

## **B.C. grizzly bear transplant plan not "set in concrete"**

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**T**he British Columbia government could establish a cross-border grizzly bear population in the North Cascades, jumping ahead of this country's efforts that have stalled for lack of congressional funding.

The B.C. Ministry of Environment, Lands and Parks is considering a proposal to release about 25 adult female grizzlies over a five-year span into Manning Provincial Park. The park begins north of the border with the North Cascades National Park Complex and Pasayten Wilderness.

Grizzlies would be trapped and relocated from the Williams Lake area in the central provincial interior, then fitted with radio collars to track their movement.

The females would ideally mate with existing males north of the border. In effect, the program would create a population and habitat for the omnivores that would extend south across the border where few if any grizzlies now exist.

A female grizzly's range may be up to 200 square miles, often limited by mobility of cubs, while a male will roam more than 500 square miles.

B.C. officials estimate the province's North Cascades recovery zone now has about 17 grizzlies but could support 250 to 300 bears. Building a "viable" population of 150 bears could take until mid-century given the species' low reproductive rates.

Female bears, which can live up to 30 years, mature sexually at five to six years, and produce only one to four cubs every three or four years.

The proposal has yet to be funded by the B.C. legislature, which is now operating on an "interim" budget that started March 31 and expires July 31, a ministry spokesman said.

There were public meetings in April in B.C. towns closest to the recovery area, including Hope, Princeton, Merritt, Keremeos, and at Manning Park Lodge.

Spokesman Alex Dabrowski said Friday (June 22) that the ministry is reviewing comments and will, "formulate a response to the opinions we heard. There may be changes to the plan.

"Nothing's set in concrete. It would have to be funded by our Cabinet. That's just a proposal and nothing has been signed off," Dabrowski said.

Although one published report said the estimated \$1 million program could begin in the fall, a recent conservative shift in government leadership and the B.C. budget uncertainty could impede plans.

Unlike in the United States, the grizzly is not protected in British Columbia by endangered species legislation. About 13,000 grizzlies are estimated to inhabit the province, most concentrated in the northern interior and coastal areas.

In recent years, several hundred B.C. grizzlies have been killed annually,

through sport hunting and as "problem bears," in areas besides the lower B.C. grizzly recovery zone. This year, the government imposed a provincewide three-year hunting moratorium.

Proposals to reintroduce grizzlies, scientifically known as *Ursus arctos horribilis*, have often met opposition by cattle and sheep ranchers, and in some cases by hikers and backcountry outfitters.

Although bear-human encounters can be tragic, since 1900 only 17 deaths in the lower 48 states have been attributed to grizzlies, according to U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service records. But records of injuries are less available.

In the United States a coalition of agencies known as the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee has proposed six grizzly recovery zones. Including the North Cascades, four of the six zones stretch across the Canadian border into either British Columbia or Alberta. The other two are in the Yellowstone region and the Bitterroot range of Montana and Idaho.

The IGBC, created in 1983, has met regularly to discuss plans in various recovery zones. In 1997, the committee met at Newhalem, a session that included a plea from Okanogan County commissioner Dave Schulz not to relocate bears into the North Cascades.

Schulz' view was countered by Mitch Friedman, director of the Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, and an activist for grizzly recovery. Friedman said then that a poll by his group showed support in western and eastern Washington for relocating grizzlies to the North Cascades.

Representatives from the United States and Canada sit on subcommittees of each country's recovery groups. The crossover participation, "will ensure that the efforts on each side of the border are complementary" to recovery, the B.C. proposal notes.

To date, most IGBC efforts have involved research and public information and programs to address potential conflicts between bears, humans and livestock. In all cases relocating grizzlies in this country would require a federal Environmental Impact Statement. The EIS process is nearing conclusion for the Bitterroot recovery proposal which has earned more federal funding.

Similar to the Canadian proposal for the North Cascades, the Bitterroot plan calls for relocating 25 bears, half from southeastern British Columbia the others from Idaho, to the recovery area on the Idaho-Montana line.

An IGBC outline of "unfunded needs" dated March of 2001 notes nearly \$2.9 million that would be required to conduct an analysis for alternatives for an EIS for the North Cascades recovery area in Washington state.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife spokesman Doug Zimmer said Monday (June 25) that cross border cooperation has always been a key part of recovery plans, he explained.

"We've always recognized that bears don't recognize international boundaries."

Zimmer said an important point with both Canadian and U. S. recovery proposals is, "these are plans, recommended things to do. That doesn't mean they're necessarily going to happen that way."

"There is only so much money to go around," Zimmer said, adding that thus far U. S. funding has been directed more to recovery efforts in the Rockies. He said the status of the \$2.9 million request for a North Cascades recovery plan EIS was uncertain.

If they exist at all in the U. S. North Cascades, evidence confirming the presence of grizzlies is sketchy and based on less reliable visual sightings.

A recent two-year study by a Washington State University team, headed by Dr. Robert Weilgus, found no conclusive evidence of grizzlies in the U. S. North Cascades through DNA testing of 400 hair samples taken from 40 barbed wire snags.

A similar 1998 study by BC researchers turned up one female grizzly among 800 hair samples tested north of the border.

One report says the last confirmed grizzly in the North Cascades was a bear killed legally near Diablo Lake in 1965. There is another account of a sighting by a Canadian biologist in 1996 south of Glacier Peak in the United States. However there are unconfirmed and less reliable visual sightings reported occasionally.

In the early 1800s, 50,000 grizzlies may have roamed the United States from the Mississippi River to the west coast, north into Canada and south to Mexico. In the journal of their great western expedition of 1803, Lewis and Clark reported killing grizzlies.

Later ravages of hunting and trapping, similar to the buffalo slaughter, reduced the population to remote areas of the Rockies and Northwest.

Nearly 3,800 grizzly pelts were shipped from 1826 to 1859 by North Cascades trading posts of the Hudson's Bay Company, although not all came from what is now the contiguous Cascades Northwest.

By the 1970s, biologists estimated the population had dropped to 600 or less in the lower 48 states. In 1975, the bear was listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

Today, experts say there may be 1,200 grizzlies, mostly in the wilderness and rugged mountains of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho and possibly in Washington. Most of the bears are found in and around Glacier and Yellowstone National parks.