



January 29, 2023

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1429 East Sixth Avenue
Helena, Montana 59620-0701

Re: Comments on Montana Statewide Grizzly Bear Management Plan 2022; comments by the North Fork Preservation Association

To whom it may concern:

We, the North Fork Preservation Association (NFPA), enclose our comments on the draft Montana Grizzly Bear Management Plan 2022, referred to hereafter as the Plan. We live, work, and recreate in the North Fork of the Flathead, the heart of the NCDE and grizzly bear country. Many of us are landowners and have coexisted successfully with grizzly bears for many decades. We want to ensure their continued survival in robust populations in the NCDE and the other grizzly bear Ecosystems, with sufficient genetic and demographic connectivity between the areas. We highly value grizzly bears and do all that we can with our NFPA vision and activities to help grizzlies survive in the wild. We strongly believe that it would be better for grizzly bears and humans if the Plan were to focus on maintaining suitable grizzly bear habitat, bear-human conflict prevention, applying science-based management, and thoughtful stewardship, and to focus less on hunting which seems to dominate much of the Plan. We do not support the hunting of grizzly bears. People come from all over the world to visit Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and grizzly-occupied habitat for a chance to see our renowned bears. Montana FWP's mission is "to provide for the stewardship of the fish, wildlife, parks, and recreational resources of Montana, while contributing to the quality of life for present and future generations". That includes maintaining our grizzly bear legacy through sound management. The 2022 Grizzly Bear Management Plan has several shortcomings to achieve FWP's stated mission, particularly 'stewardship' and 'future generations'. We are one of three states (if you include a handful of grizzlies in Idaho) in all of the Lower 48 states to harbor viable populations of this legacy species. Montana's FWP can do better as a state management agency with our state animal than what the 2022 Plan proposes. Herein are our suggestions.

Connectivity

The Plan states “A remaining challenge is ensuring long-term connectivity between those zones” followed by “FWP’s Preferred Alternative does not manage for grizzly bear presence outside of core areas”. These are conflicting statements. It is not possible to ensure long-term connectivity between Ecosystems by conducting grizzly bear control in connectivity areas outside of core zones. In these connectivity zones FWP must manage for grizzly bear success and minimizing human-bear conflicts. These areas are critical to connecting grizzly bear populations and ensuring long-term population viability. These connectivity areas may be more likely to be areas of human-bear conflict because humans living in the connectivity areas are not used to living with grizzly bears and may not have removed attractants. This is a critical area for increased FWP outreach and conflict prevention through education, assistance in removing attractants, and preemptive actions, rather than removing or killing grizzlies. Individual grizzly bears should be left on site and not be removed from areas outside defined corridors if the grizzly bear has not caused conflicts.

In terms of defining occupied grizzly bear areas and connectivity areas, it is very difficult to keep up with drawn lines on maps. Maps provided in the Plan do not accurately reflect where bears may live. The Plan should use the “Grizzly May Be Present” map drafted by the US Fish and Wildlife Service: <https://www.fws.gov/media/grizzly-bear-may-be-present-map>. This map was a collaborative effort between several agencies and is the best and most current information on grizzly bear potential locations. The bears will define, by their presence, the appropriate connectivity areas between described bear populations. Human-made boundaries are arbitrary, and may not be what grizzly bears consider good habitat.

The Plan suggests that all captured bears and dead bears “should” have their DNA tested to determine their population of origin to assess if connectivity areas are functioning well. The Plan needs to firmly state that all captured bears and dead grizzly bears “shall” have their DNA tested for their population of origin. This will be immensely helpful in assessing connectivity. These DNA test results and mortality counts must be available to the public in easily accessible reports and presentations by FWP staff.

Avoidable Grizzly Bear Mortalities: Wolf Trapping/Snaring/Baiting; Hound Hunting of Black Bears

Some grizzly bear mortalities may be unavoidable. But FWP can assist in proactively preventing many grizzly bear deaths by working with the legislature to change hunting and trapping laws, especially those that were passed by the legislature in the past three years, and by incorporating concerns identified in public comments on the Plan.

Hunting black bears with hounds will result in the death of grizzlies, hounds and likely humans pursuing the black bears. This is not mentioned in the Plan. Hound hunting of black bears must be banned, and the new legislation sanctioning it must be reversed; and in the meantime, the Plan must limit hunting black bears with hounds in grizzly bear habitat.

New legislation sanctioning killing wolves by more liberalized trapping, snaring and baiting will result in additional grizzly bear deaths. Wolf trapping often occurs in occupied and potentially occupied grizzly bear habitat, and bears are drawn to the same attractants/baits as wolves. This is not mentioned in the Plan. The new liberalized wolf killing laws must be diminished or eliminated. Wolf trapping seasons must be banned between March 1 and Dec 31, a period when some grizzly bears have not yet denned or have emerged from their dens. This is a critical time for bears who are seeking calories for hibernation and

drawn to baits, and thus are vulnerable to being caught in wolf traps. This problem will be exacerbated by continuing climate change as denning seasons start later and end sooner. This trend has already been documented.

The public has lost trust in FWP's destructive wolf harvest program developed by legislators and our governor, which has the appearance of a wolf eradication program. The liberalization of wolf killing by unethical means that defy fair chase, a sacred principle of hunting, has people worried about a similar outcome for grizzly bears and hunting once grizzlies are delisted. Before the 2020 legislature, wolf harvest laws were more restrictive and supported or tolerated by the most of the public. But since the new laws were passed (*HB 224, 225, SB 314, SB 468*) to increase the wolf and black bear kill, the public has become vocal and engaged as evidenced by the many lawsuits recently filed. The public believes that the state/FWP will pull the same stunt with grizzly bears and has lost faith in FWP to manage their carnivores.

More Proactive Conflict Reduction

The Final Report from the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council (GBAC), 2020, cited in the Plan, is a thorough and reasonable document, and we suggest that the state looks more closely at the GBAC report in modeling the Plan. Priorities in the GBAC Final Report: 1) Education and Outreach, 2) Conflict Prevention and Reduction, 3) Conflict Response and Protocols, 4) Grizzly Bear Distribution, Relocations, and Connectivity (FWP should continue to allow natural movement to new areas between all four identified recovery zones in Montana), and 5) Resources (increased FWP staff capacity to meet the scope and scale of conservation and management needs and opportunities). We strongly support these GBAC recommendations and want more emphasis of these considerations in the Plan, and less emphasis on hunting, removing, and killing grizzly bears.

Funding

The state must find ways to better fund grizzly bear monitoring, management, outreach, implementation of preventative measures, and research. Staff are severely underfunded and overworked. Bear Specialists have sought outside funding and partnerships to support technicians, outreach and education, and conflict prevention tools. It is appalling that FWP, whose logo is the grizzly bear, has been reduced to bake sale funding mentality to try to fund a grizzly bear program where the bear population is expanding rapidly and becoming increasingly expensive. This oversight is compounded by a rapid expansion of residential areas in grizzly habitat as the human population increases in Montana.

Grizzly bears generate significant economic returns in the form of park visitor expenditures, guide service revenues, stores, lodging accommodations, dining, and related expenditures. Perhaps some of these dollars might be captured somehow to support state management expenses other than relying upon trophy hunting license fees.

Protocols for Moving Grizzly Bears

We disagree with FWP's preferred alternative regarding moving non-conflict bears to areas outside of grizzly occupied range: "If FWP proposes to move a bear into unoccupied habitat for purposes of

recovery or connectivity, it will first complete an environmental analysis and seek approval from the Commission.” This will take weeks while the bear is confined, left in a conflict situation, or killed. This is unacceptable.

Being that FWP is managing Montana’s wildlife for the now and future generations of Montanan’s, the Plan should put more emphasis on public opinion, public outreach, resources to help public reduce attractants, funding for grizzly bear staff and research, and less emphasis/power on what the Commissioners think. The commissioners are a panel of seven people appointed by the governor, who are subject to political pressures and biases, and who are not bear biologists or scientists. Legislators and commissioners tied the hands of FWP to manage grizzly bears in the new laws passed by the 2021 legislature. For example: “As of March 2022, FWP can no longer move federally listed grizzly bears that are involved in conflict and captured outside core areas; however, FWP can move federally listed bears not involved in conflict outside RZs to sites previously approved for that purpose by the Commission. This restriction does not preclude FWP from providing conflict response and working toward conflict resolution, but it does significantly limit FWP’s ability to address especially persistent conflicts.”

Research

We would like to see increased trend monitoring efforts in occupied grizzly bear habitat throughout Montana. The present trend monitoring program is very small in scope and underfunded. Funding is discussed above under “Funding”. We would like to see more research on the ecological needs, social concerns, grizzly bear population monitoring, effective tools to mitigate or prevent human-grizzly conflicts, and non-lethal methods to deal with human-grizzly challenges.

Hunting

There is a tacit assumption throughout the Plan that hunting grizzly bears will reduce human-bear conflict. The Plan cites the model of black bear hunting to support this conclusion. However, from the Plan “As reflected in ARM 12.9.1401 from 1977, a reasonable thought is that hunting of grizzly bears could be useful in reducing bear-human conflicts, and that hunting could modify the behavior of bears so as to reduce their danger to humans. FWP is not aware of definitive research that could support or refute either assumption for grizzly bears in Montana.” Furthermore, The GBAC reported “we cannot reach consensus that hunting has a role in grizzly bear management”. GBAC also reported “We acknowledge that hunting is not likely to be an effective tool for conflict prevention or reduction.” So why does the Plan strongly support grizzly bear hunting and discuss many hunting options including targeting conflict bears, limited draw, trophy hunting, an auction trophy hunt (to raise funds), and a population growth reduction hunt? MCA 87-2-701 requires successful grizzly bear hunters to purchase a trophy license. However, as a game animal, any successful hunter would be prohibited from wasting edible meat, like with hunting deer or elk. It would be an extremely low percentage of hunters that would consume grizzly bear meat, and counter to Montana statute. Furthermore, a population growth reduction hunt would be inappropriate until connectivity is established between grizzly bear recovery zones.

Grizzly bears are not resilient like wolves and other hunted species. As noted in the Plan, grizzlies have a low reproductive rate, with an average of two cubs born once every three years. Females have a late onset of reproduction, averaging 5.8 years old at first reproduction. A mismanaged grizzly bear hunt could have short-term and long-term negative impacts on the grizzly bear population.

We do not support a hunting season of grizzly bears. But if FWP goes ahead with a hunt, we request a no-hunting time period of a minimum of five years after delisting before any hunting is permitted. This gives the state time to develop more scientifically sound options. We do not support an Auction trophy hunt. This is repugnant and does not in any way serve to manage bears. Much research has been conducted and findings report that trophy hunting is viewed progressively as unacceptable and jeopardizes public trust in FWP.

Climate Change

Whitebark pines are disappearing at an alarming rate, and were listed by USFWS as an endangered species on December 15, 2022. The high-energy seeds of the whitebark pine are an important food resource for grizzly bears. Climate change has hastened the demise of whitebark pines via white pine blister rust and mountain pine beetle infestations. Hopefully, bears as generalists will switch to other food resources as whitebark pines disappear. This is one challenge in grizzly bear management that FWP and the Plan cannot proactively prevent. But it is one more stressor on grizzly bears and potentially increased bear-human conflicts which FWP can manage for, as bears seek other food sources.

Shorter bear denning seasons have already been recorded as the climate warms. FWP and the state can address this challenge by shortening the wolf trapping seasons, as detailed in our comments above under “Avoidable bear mortalities”.

Climate change-induced drought is more frequently jeopardizing the production of berries and other natural bear foods. This often leads to grizzly bears coming into conflict with humans as the bears seek out critical calories. FWP cannot control berry crop failure, but they can minimize and sometimes prevent grizzly-human conflict by more intense outreach, education, and working with the public to install bear deterrent devices at attract sites or remove attractants altogether.

Certainly, more climate change-related events that are not now recognized will occur in the future that could threaten grizzly bear survival. In 2022 three young grizzly bears tested positive for HPAI (avian flu), and all three had to be euthanized because of their poor condition. Such future stochastic events may be detected and assessed through more frequent and broadscale monitoring.

Economics

The revenue generated from hunting and non-consumptive wildlife viewing have been thoroughly reviewed in from R. B. Keiter’s Wyoming Law Review 303, 2022: “Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks jointly generated more than \$1.04 billion in visitor spending in 2020; Wyoming derived \$850 million statewide from its various national park sites, while Montana derived \$445 million statewide from its national park sites. In Montana, hunting expenditures by nonresidents, including guide and outfitter services, hotel, and other travel-related expenditures, appears to have generated roughly \$200 million statewide in 2017. In Wyoming, a state Game and Fish Department report indicates that wildlife viewing generated \$365 million for local economies across the state in 2016, while hunting accounted for \$206 million. In short, the limited information available strongly suggests that the economic return from national park visitation and wildlife viewing notably outstrips guiding and hunting revenues. Which, in turn, suggests that limitations on hunting wolves and grizzlies near the parks should benefit national park visitor revenues without significantly impacting hunting-related revenues.” We can

assume comparable hunting vs. wildlife viewing statistics for Glacier National Park and the NCDE where our grizzlies attract people world-wide.

The Plan discusses per-capita income, Agricultural characteristics, ratio of cows to people, wood products, the costs of historic grizzly bear hunting licenses, but no mention is made of the economic value of grizzly bears to Montana's economy through tourism. The Plan needs to address this oversight.

Society's Values and FWP Relationships

Two failed grizzly bear delisting efforts highlight the legal, social, political and scientific dimensions of grizzly bear management. The Plan mentions the Tri-state MOA with Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. But the degree of actual collaboration and future planning efforts to ensure connectivity and viable grizzly bear populations is dubious. The success of grizzly bear recovery depends on coordination between all three states, the tribes and the FWS to maintain viable populations and connectivity between the Ecosystems. FWP needs to discuss the larger landscape scale issues involved in grizzly bear management, not just concerns for Montana, in the Plan. If the grizzly bear is delisted, Montana will be sharing grizzly bear management responsibilities with the National Park Service and several tribes.

The biggest challenge, and one which FWP cannot control, is the exponential growth of humans recreating and moving to Montana. Humans create substantial management headaches for wildlife managers, especially controversial species like grizzly bears and wolves. We have seen increasing motorized recreation in grizzly habitat, including snowmobiling into grizzly bear denning habitat. Glacier National Park has had to go to a restrictive permitting system to enter the Park, which denies access to thousands of potential visitors, who then spill over onto other public and private lands that are occupied by grizzlies. This significantly increases the chances of human-bear conflict and deaths for both species. Human attractants and additional tourism pressures caused the death of four grizzlies in the North Fork in 2021--Monica and her three cubs are just one of many examples. Since FWP cannot control the rapidly growing human influx and related bear-conflicts, it is imperative that the Plan manages grizzlies conservatively and emphasizes and enables more proactive bear conflict prevention remedies.

Thank you for your consideration and the opportunity to comment on the Montana Grizzly Bear Management Plan 2022.

Sincerely,

Flannery Coats Freund, President of the Board, North Fork Preservation Association

Diane K. Boyd, Board member, Wildlife Committee Chair, North Fork Preservation Association