



August 2, 2020

Grizzly Bear Advisory Council
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
1420 E. 6th Ave.
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Grizzly Bear Advisory Council,

Thank you for your dedication this past year to develop recommendations that will inform the future management of Montana's official state animal, the iconic grizzly bear. Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance recognizes that grizzly bear management is a difficult and complicated issue. Thank you for your time and energy. Thank you too for the opportunity to offer comment on your draft recommendations before finalization.

Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance is a grassroots conservation organization based in East Glacier Park. Our organization is committed to the complete recovery of grizzly bears in Montana. On behalf of our hundreds of members and supporters, I am pleased to provide the following comment on the Grizzly Bear Advisory Council's (Council) draft recommendations. This comment specifically refers to the July 28th version of the "Consolidated DRAFT Recommendations" posted on the Council's webpage. This comment is organized by the topical headings in this document.

I. Preamble

We appreciate the acknowledgement of the significance of grizzly bears to many Native Nations, both in Montana and encouragement that traditional knowledge and values be incorporated into the conservation and management of the bears. Similarly, we appreciate the acknowledgement of the species significance to other residents and visitors to our state. We also appreciate the acknowledgement that recovery of grizzly bears is an on-going process and that public, private, and working lands are all significant to the successful conservation of this animal species. The preamble could use a few tweaks. First, the preamble should stress the importance of both genetic and demographic connectivity to the recovery and persistence of a healthy grizzly bear population. Genetic and demographic connectivity measure different aspects by which distinct populations interact and affect each other over different time scales. Currently, grizzly populations in Montana remain geographically isolated with no known natural exchange of genetics or individuals between populations. Establishing both genetic and demographic is critical if recovery is to be sustained. Second, the Preamble should acknowledge that a primary obstacle to grizzly bear recovery is human-caused mortality and that reducing human-caused mortality should continue to be a primary focus of management even after eventual de-listing. Both these tweaks would better contextualize the rest of the document.

PO Box 181
East Glacier Park
MT 59434

Phone: (406) 531-5098
info@glaciertwomedicine.org
GlacierTwoMedicine.org

III. Guiding Principles

The Guiding Principles contain many laudable statements. In particular, we appreciate:

- the clear expectation that all people in Montana should expect to potentially encounter grizzly bears on the landscape.
- the emphasis on reducing negative human-bear interactions through various non-lethal strategies as well as secure habitat protections.
- the need to develop new and diverse resource bases, including both public and private funding sources, as well as conservation tools.
- the use of best available science to inform management (including the consideration of the effects of climate change on bear food sources),
- the role of working landscapes in grizzly recovery – like any wildlife species, bear distribution should not be determined by land ownership.
- the importance of engagement, especially with local communities and landowners, as well as broader public education, to promote coexistence.

At the same time, we think several principles should be removed, revised or added.

Guiding Principle #9 should be removed. The wording in this principle is unclear, but seems intent on demarcating certain lands as beyond the pale for grizzly occupancy and recovery based on social rather than biological criteria. The Council should not recommend any management approaches that place a priori limits on the future distribution of grizzly bears in their historic habitat. Furthermore, as FWP briefed the Council last November, lands east of the Rocky Mountain Front and north of I-90 are critical to linking the grizzly bear population in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) with bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). Vast areas in this geographic region also provide suitable grizzly habitat in their own right and re-occupancy should be anticipated and facilitated by managers via promotion of coexistence strategies. Any new “lines” would also be in conflict with the Conservation Strategy for the NCDE laid out by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Guiding Principle #13 should be revised. While, the Council is right to emphasize the importance of connectivity to the long-term recovery and persistence of grizzly bears, the recommendation needs to name both “genetic and demographic connectivity.” It is also unclear what the Council means by “acceptable” or “appropriate” habitat but creates a likely and unacceptable pre-tense to keep or remove bears from certain areas based on social preferences rather than actual conditions on the ground. Thus this third sentence which begins “Not all of these settings...” should be removed.

Guiding Principle #15 should be strongly revised. We recognize that bear management resources are limited and priorities have to be made. However as written, Guiding Principle #15 indicates that parts of Montana will remain unprepared indefinitely for the presence of grizzly bears so that resources are prioritized in areas of existing occupancy. This effectively creates areas of Montana “off-limits” to grizzlies by discouraging the necessary proactive investments necessary to prepare these areas for possible occupancy by grizzly bears. Slicing up the map is an unacceptable way to manage Montana’s native wildlife. Instead, the state should continuously seek to “get out ahead” of bears in both space and time to help prepare communities to live with these animals. This will require finding additional resources through public and private partnerships (including with non-profit organizations). A more accurate principle would state:

“Communities in parts of Montana where grizzly bears are not currently established but near where bears are expanding their range will likely need assistance from the state and other partners to prepare for and adapt to living successfully with grizzly bears.”

We also believe the Council should add two new principles to guide grizzly bear management. The first identifies the proper legal and theoretical basis for management:

“Grizzly bears are a native wildlife species that will be managed according to public trust principles.”

Montana FWP has a proud history of conserving and managing native wildlife in the public trust as well as advancing the principles of public trust thinking. This new guiding principle clarifies that grizzly bears will be managed as a public trust resource for the benefit of all Montanans present and future.

The second new principle identifies co-existence as a primary goal for management.

“Management of grizzly bears should first and foremost seek to promote the ability and willingness of Montana residents to co-exist with grizzly bears.”

Long-term persistence requires co-existence and that goal needs to be laid out in plain language.

Section 2

Education and Outreach

Education and outreach is critical to the long-term success of grizzly bear management in Montana. The council included many excellent recommendations. In particular, we appreciate:

- An annual state-wide celebration of grizzly bears
- Expanding public education opportunities, including Bear Aware programs, and FWP’s capacity to provide the public with clear, accurate and accessible information
- The emphasis on non-lethal conflict prevention measures, including educating the wider public on the use of bear spray as the best means of personal safety
- Better public communications and consistent messaging in order to enhance public understanding of grizzly bear management

The following changes will improve the Council’s draft recommendations:

#2 – The Council should add to this recommendation that hunters must successfully complete the Bear Identification Program prior to purchasing a bear-hunting license *each year*, not merely prior to purchasing their *first* bear hunting license as is currently required.

#6 – Rephrase to direct Montana FWP to create a state-wide database that tracks annual grizzly mortality across the whole state. The database should be publicly accessible and include data by recovery zones, grizzly demographics, and mortality source. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team database for the GYE rightly serves as an excellent model.

Conflict Prevention

We support all the provisions suggested in this section of the draft recommendations. We suggest the inclusion of an additional recommendation related to hunting. The Council should recommend that FWP **require** all licensed hunters (regardless of target species) hunting in known or likely grizzly bear habitat to carry bear spray in an accessible manner. Failure to comply should be subject to penalty.

Agriculture

Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance fully supports greater funding for the Livestock Loss Board that would support the availability and implementation of non-lethal conflict reduction tools and practices. Ranches and other private lands provide key habitat for grizzly bears, just as they do for other native wildlife species. While private landowners have a civic duty and legal responsibility to allow wildlife on their property, including grizzly bears, the public as owners and beneficiaries of these animals should help landowners adapt to living with grizzly bears. Greater funding for non-lethal conflict prevention measures is a critical part of this equation. At the same time, we encourage the Council to recommend that livestock owners must implement non-lethal measures as a pre-requisite to be eligible for financial compensation should they lose livestock to grizzly bears.

Waste Management/Sanitation

We fully support the development and implementation of waste management policies and practices throughout grizzly country as well as in areas of likely grizzly expansion. Requirements and provisions for bear-proof garbage cans or the secure storage of pet food/birdseed help keep attractants away from bears and reduce the likelihood of food habituation or other conflicts. Programs and resources that help communities/sanitation companies transition to best practices should be developed and/or promoted.

Conflict Response

We fully support permanent, year-round funding for bear management specialists and technicians. These positions are critical to our collective ability to cultivate greater co-existence with grizzly bears. Additional positions need to be created and located in areas where bears are expanding.

Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance offers two changes:

- 17(iv)(5): NEW. Add *“Fully funding these positions would allow bear managers to build social tolerance for current and future grizzly bear occupancy.”*
- 17(viii): Revise. There are two problems with this recommendation. First, the language “more strictly” is unclear but seems to wrongly suggest that bears outside these identified zones will more likely euthanized or relocated should some “problem” occur than they would be under similar circumstances elsewhere. This in turn implies demarcation in the areas of Montana bears may occupy as a matter of policy rather than actual conditions on the ground. The Council should not be making such distinctions. Rather, this provision should read *“Grizzly bears outside established recovery and connectivity zones should be managed to facilitate recovery and connectivity goals. Grizzly bear occupancy in these areas will not be actively discouraged. They will be managed primarily through conflict response techniques.”* Such language mirrors language in the NCDE Conservation Strategy.

Distribution, Relocation, and Occupancy

Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance is largely in support of this set of recommendations. We particularly like the recommendations that further the ability of bears to occupy recovery zones, areas between

recovery zones, as well as managers to relocate bears to locations that further recovery and conservation. We particularly appreciate #26 which seeks to reduce transportation related mortality. Train-strikes and highway mortality continue to be concerning sources of mortality for bears in our area of the NCDE. Improved plans and coordination to minimize and mitigate food attractants along right-of-ways must be a priority.

Several of this set of recommendations need revision. We recommend revising #25 to include state forest lands, not just federal lands. We would add a clause that reads:

“The state of Montana should minimize road building and other habitat altering projects on states lands identified as important grizzly bear habitat.”

If followed, this recommendation will help provide habitat security and continuity between state and federal lands as well as reduce conflicts between human users of state forests and grizzly bears.

Next, we strongly encourage the Council to remove recommendations #27, #28, and #29. All three recommendations seek to define areas where bears may be and areas where bears may not be. We disagree with this approach. While we recognize the need to prioritize limited resources, these recommendations (especially #29) suggest that the ability of bears to inhabit an area will be based on pre-determined resource allocation decisions, not the biological suitability of the land, tolerance of local residents, and behavior of the bear. These recommendations also insinuate that managers know which areas are important for dispersing bears and which aren't. Although biologists can make predictions with some degree of confidence, recent bear expansion suggests the bears themselves have a far better nose for how to navigate the landscape. Just as we need to provide managers flexibility in response to conditions on the ground, bears too need flexibility and freedom to pioneer their preferred corridors. We also disagree with #29's suggestion that removal of bears should be prioritized based on geography. FWP should follow the lead of the NCDE Conservation Strategy and not actively discourage bear occupancy anywhere. The agency should only use capture and relocation when other non-lethal methods of managing problem bears are not likely to be successful. As written, #29 is bad bear management, inconsistent with public trust principles, and inconsistent with recommendations of the Council throughout this document that place a premium on coexistence.

Finally, we suggest two additional recommendations to this section. First, the Council should add:

Montana FWP should work with the USFS and the Pacific Northwest Trail Association to re-route the Pacific Northwest Trail away from secure grizzly habitat in the Cabinet-Yaak recovery zone.

The grizzly population in the Yaak barely persists and has limited areas of secure habitat. Federal agencies should not be routing more people into areas that are absolutely vital for the recovery of this population. Plenty of alternative locations exist that can provide an exceptional trail experience for long-distance hiking with far less impacts to this population of grizzly bears.

Second, the Council should explicitly acknowledge the importance of the NCDE grizzly bear population as a potential source for population augmentation/reintroduction in other recovery zones, including the Bitterroots and North Cascades by adding the following recommendation:

“If the US Fish and Wildlife Service seeks to restore or augment grizzly bear populations in other federally identified grizzly bear recovery zones, then Montana FWP should willingly assist those efforts if asked to do so by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.”

This would help ensure continued cooperation between the two governments in the recovery of grizzly bears in the event Montana resumes management for certain subpopulations, such as in the NCDE or GYE.

Resources

We fully agree that successful grizzly bear management will require greater resources than are currently available to Montana FWP. Additional capacity must be generated including diversified funding for the state as well as partnerships with both government and non-government entities. We appreciate the Council pushing the state to seek creative ways to acquire the necessary resources and partnerships to promote grizzly bear recovery. Per recommendation #13, Glacier-Two Medicine Alliance would be happy to serve on a citizen working group that further explored these possibilities.

Section 2 – Guidance Around the Role of Hunting

Finally, we offer the following comments on hunting. Until grizzly bears are fully recovered, any discussion of hunting is premature as hunting is fully at odds with the conservation of the species at this time as it increases human-caused mortality – a key limiting factor in grizzly recovery. Furthermore, as the Council’s draft recommendation document makes abundantly clear (as does the record of presentations at previous Council meetings), there is no conclusive scientific evidence that a sport hunt will have the conflict-mitigation effect its boosters suggest. This is especially true if grizzly bears are managed consistent with public trust principles, including fair chase hunting. Nor is there good evidence that sport hunting actually increases tolerance. Given the absence of scientific evidence for sport hunting of grizzly bears as an effective conservation tool and the lack of demonstrable public acceptability of sport hunting, the Council should recommend against creating a sport hunt for grizzly bears. If it cannot, then the Council at the very least, should recommend FWP reassess the scientific merits and public acceptability of hunting only after grizzly bears have fully recovered in all four recovery zones in Montana. Furthermore, any future determination on whether or not to institute a hunt must equally consider the interests of non-consumptive wildlife enthusiasts (e.g. wildlife watchers, artists, photographers, scientists and other non-hunters) as well as the potential impacts to Montana’s tourism economy.

The Council should recommend at this time that FWP honor tribal nations’ opposition to the hunting of grizzly bears and their unique cultural relationship with grizzly bears – as indicated by the Grizzly Bear Treaty between over 200 Tribal Nations and various statements from individual tribal nations such as the Blackfeet and Confederated Salish and Kootenai. FWP could best do this by prohibiting outright all hunting of grizzly bears on public lands that are culturally important to federally-recognized tribes, such as the Badger-Two Medicine or the Crazy Mountains. Such a recommendation would be not only the right thing to do, but would also be consistent with the preamble of the draft recommendations.

In closing, we appreciate the hard work of our fellow citizens to provide guidance to the future state management of this valued native species. Thank you for taking our comments and considering them before finalizing your recommendations. We believe our recommendations will help improve the long success of grizzly bear conservation and management in Montana, further adding to our

states' deserved legacy as a leader in wildlife conservation. The grizzly bear deserves to be managed as a valued native wildlife species throughout its historic range in Montana. Anything that sets parts of Montana as automatically off-limits to bears should be struck from these recommendations.

Sincerely,

Peter Metcalf
Executive Director