

US judge delays grizzly bear hunts in Rockies two more weeks

September 13 2018, by Matthew Brown

A U.S. judge on Thursday delayed for two more weeks the first grizzly bear hunts in the Lower 48 states in almost three decades, saying he needed more time to consider if federal protections for the animals should be restored.

The ruling by U.S. District Judge Dana Christensen left the fate of the bruins in and around Yellowstone National Park in limbo, more than a year after federal officials declared the population had recovered from near extermination.

Up to 23 bears could be killed in the hunts planned in Wyoming and Idaho. Christensen already delayed them once, in an order that came two days before grizzly season was set to open Sept. 1.

In extending the delay, the judge said there remained "serious questions" regarding whether the government acted lawfully in lifting protections on an estimated 700 bears in the three-state Yellowstone region. He gave no further indication of his position in the case.

Wildlife advocates and Native American tribes requested the additional two-week delay after suing the government to restore the bears' threatened species status. Attorneys for the federal government and the states of Idaho and Wyoming opposed the delay.

Christensen said it was justified because killing up to 23 bears would cause "irreparable injury" to those who want grizzlies protected.

"That hardship substantially outweighs the hardship to be endured by the defendants ... who must refrain only from hunting grizzly bears for an additional two weeks," Christensen wrote.

Wyoming Game and Fish Department chief game warden Brian Nesvik said the agency would abide by Christensen's order but was disappointed.

"Wyoming Game and Fish has a strong grizzly bear management program with protections for the bear population as a whole but also allows for a conservative hunting season," Nesvik said in a statement.

Wildlife advocates welcomed the delay. Bethany Cotton with the group WildEarth Guardians characterized the judge's order as "a stay of execution."

Wyoming's hunt has two parts: Outlying areas with a quota of 12 bears, and prime grizzly habitat near Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks, where up to 10 bears could be killed.

Hunting in the prime habitat would be stopped if a single female bear were killed. No hunting is allowed in the two parks.

Idaho's hunting quota is one bear.

The Yellowstone grizzly population has increased from an estimated 136 bears when they were granted protections in 1975.

Bears now come into frequent conflicts with humans, through attacks on domestic livestock and people who encounter bears unexpectedly in the forest.

The Yellowstone region bears also range across a large portion of

Montana, where officials decided against a hunt this year in part to demonstrate their commitment to conserving grizzlies.

Montana was the last state in the Lower 48 to allow grizzly [hunting](#), in 1991, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Grizzly [bears](#) elsewhere in the Lower 48 remain protected as a threatened species. They are hunted in Alaska.

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