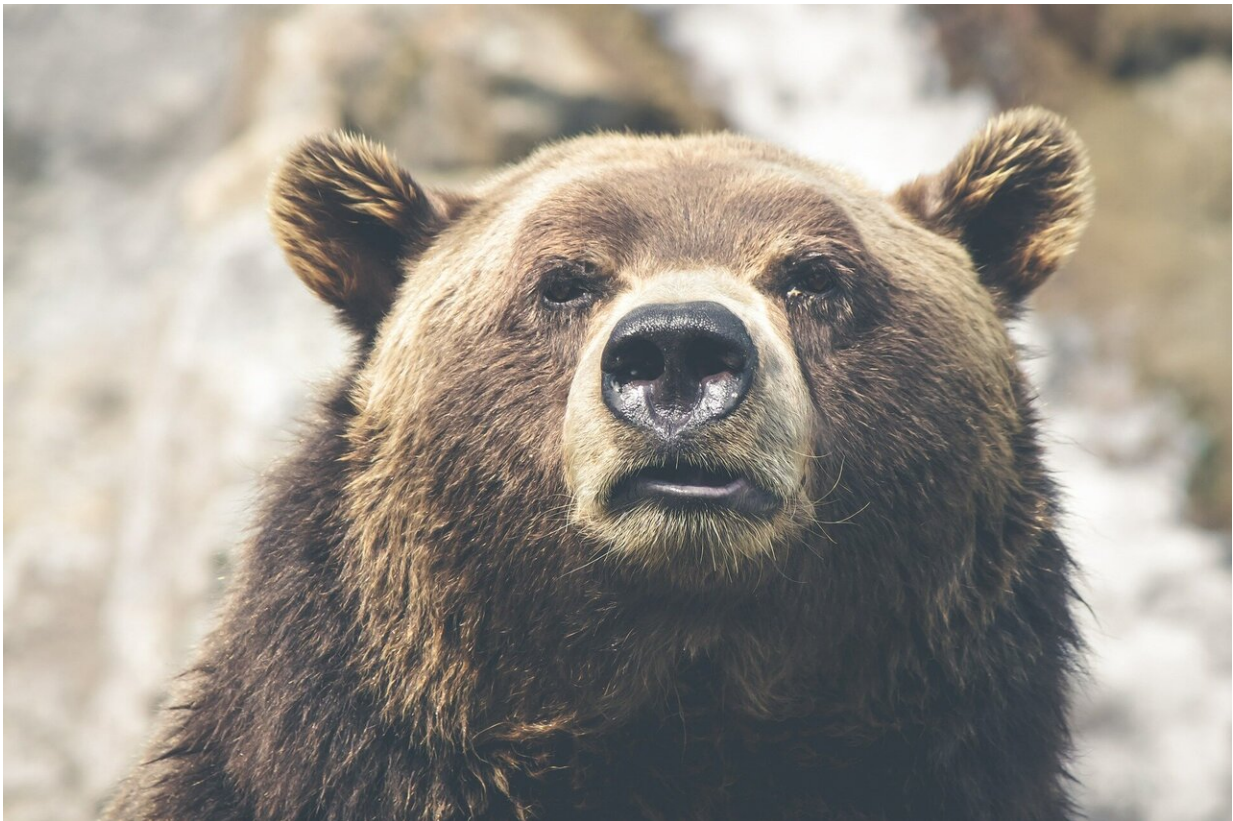


Idaho grizzly bears near Yellowstone could lose endangered species protections

February 6 2023, by Nicole Blanchard



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One day after Idaho officials threatened to sue the federal government for failing to respond to petitions to remove grizzly bears from Endangered Species Act protections, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

said it will move forward with reconsidering the bears' position—though it won't consider Idaho's argument.

Fish and Wildlife on Friday issued findings on petitions from Wyoming, Montana and Idaho that sought to delist grizzlies. Idaho's [petition](#) was the broadest, asking officials to remove protections for all [grizzly bears](#) in the contiguous United States. Wyoming and Montana petitioned to delist bears in the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems.

Federal officials said the claims in Idaho's petition weren't substantial enough to prompt further review, but Wyoming and Montana's were sufficient to initiate a status review of grizzlies in the two ecosystems.

The status review could be the first step toward removing grizzlies from Endangered Species Act protections, which would likely lead to a grizzly hunting season in Idaho. Already the decision has prompted an outcry from conservation groups, who say it could threaten the bears' recovery, and from Idaho politicians who blasted the dismissal of Idaho's petition.

Delisting would affect some Idaho grizzlies

The Fish and Wildlife Service decision comes 11 months after Idaho's petition was filed and more than a year after Montana and Wyoming's petitions.

On Thursday, Idaho Gov. Brad Little's office announced its intent to sue the [federal government](#) if officials did not respond to the petition by early April. Little's office said [federal officials](#) disregarded the original 90-day deadline to respond when the petitions were filed.

In a statement provided to the Idaho Statesman via email, Little said his office will "continue to push back against the federal government" and

called the decision an example of federal overreach.

"The response is seven months late, and it took a threat of legal action from the state of Idaho to simply receive a response," Little said.

The federal agency's findings kick off a 12-month review on the bears' status in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems.

While the Northern Continental Divide area is entirely in Montana, the Greater Yellowstone zone includes parts of Montana, Wyoming and the eastern edge of Idaho. Idaho also includes the Bitterroot zone and parts of the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak zones. Grizzly bears in those areas—all in North Idaho—are not part of the consideration for delisting.

In his statement, Little said Fish and Wildlife's decision will disproportionately impact North Idaho.

If bears in the two ecosystems lose their "threatened" status, it won't be the first time grizzly protections have changed. Since they were first listed in 1975, they were removed from Endangered Species Act protections twice, in 2007 and 2017. In 2018, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game had set up a hunt for a single grizzly in eastern Idaho before a judge returned the bears to threatened status.

While Fish and Wildlife said in its findings that grizzly populations in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide areas appear to have improved, it also noted some potential obstacles.

The federal agency applauded the three states' recovery efforts but said "the impact of recently enacted state statutes affecting these two grizzly bear populations is of concern and will require careful consideration."

The decision didn't point to specific state laws, but conservation groups in recent years have sued to challenge Idaho's expanded wolf trapping laws, arguing that they could lead to the incidental trapping of grizzlies and lynx. A judge rejected the lawsuit.

Idaho congressmen criticize decision

Several [conservation groups](#) on Friday issued statements criticizing Fish and Wildlife Service's decision to review the bears' status. The Center for Biological Diversity said the move "could pave the way for the trophy hunting of grizzly bears in parts of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming."

Derek Goldman, national field director for the Endangered Species Coalition, told the Statesman in an emailed statement that he's glad the Fish and Wildlife Service called out state laws that could pose a threat to grizzly recovery.

"Given the current trajectory of state policy in Montana and Idaho, state management would be a disaster for grizzly bears' recovery and the people of Montana, Idaho and the nation," Goldman said.

Statements from Western Watersheds Project and WildEarth Guardians expressed similar concerns.

Idaho's congressional delegation also blasted the decision—but for vastly different reasons.

In a joint statement, Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch and Rep. Russ Fulcher said they "condemn" the Fish and Wildlife Service decision to dismiss Idaho's petition.

"We stand by Gov. Little and Idaho's wildlife managers," they said. "The

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's failure to provide answers, transparency and science-backed reasoning for their decision is unacceptable."

In his own statement, Rep. Mike Simpson said he was "disappointed" in the outcome. None of the lawmakers acknowledged the decision to review the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly population.

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