

Is grizzly bear reintroduction 'a death sentence' or restoring nature? Idaho comments are torn

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A proposal to reintroduce grizzly bears to part of Central Idaho has roiled tensions, with advocates saying the action is decades late and

critics claiming it's a step toward gruesome maulings.

Earlier this year, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed options to reintroduce grizzlies in the Bitterroot ecosystem of Idaho and Montana after a Montana [federal judge](#) ruled that agency officials did not adequately assist bear recovery there. The area was identified in the early 1990s as one of several recovery zones for the species, which remains under endangered species protections in the contiguous United States.

But unlike other recovery zones, the Bitterroot hasn't seen a rebounding grizzly bear population in the last three decades. And some in the area would like to keep it that way.

"This is not an 'experiment,' this is a death sentence in the making," read one comment submitted 11 times by different Lemhi County residents and anonymous commenters.

An Idaho Statesman analysis of hundreds of comments found a roughly even split between those in favor of a reintroduced bear population, those who want to aid grizzlies in repopulating the area naturally and those who want the government to scrap the project. The public comment period for the project closes March 18.

Idaho leaders have been outspoken critics of grizzly bear protections in recent years, petitioning the federal government to remove the bears from Endangered Species Act protections. Gov. Brad Little's office did not respond to a request for comment on the project.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game told The Idaho Statesman that state agency comments on the project are being coordinated through the Governor's Office of Species Conservation. Officials with the Office of Species Conservation did not respond to requests for comment.

Already, some prominent groups have supported natural repopulation, allowing grizzlies—which have occasionally been documented traveling through the Bitterroot in recent years—to make their way to the ecosystem on their own.

The Idaho Conservation League has called for a natural rewilding, and Patagonia outdoor gear company has placed social media ads promoting the nonprofit's recent grizzly event. The Idaho Wildlife Federation's North Idaho Field Representative Kyle Maki told the Statesman his organization is "heavily leaning towards" supporting natural repopulation.

Steve Nadeau, a retired Idaho Department of Fish and Game large carnivore biologist and author of the book "Journey of the Bitterroot Grizzly Bear," plans to speak about grizzlies during the Idaho Conservation League webinar Thursday. Nadeau told the Statesman an enhanced natural recovery could include constructing wildlife crossings or implementing policies that improve wildlife corridors and reduce potential bear mortality.

"If they're looking at natural recovery as an option, there needs to be a focus on keeping these critters alive," Nadeau said. "If you just kill one female by accident or on purpose as a control action, you just set back recovery for decades."

Some online commenters said they believe grizzlies are already permanently living in the area or will be soon without [human intervention](#).

"It's going to happen faster than you think," John Oetinger wrote. "There's little benefit in speeding it up, and you're just going to irritate people and waste money."

Many opponents said grizzly reintroduction would turn Idaho into "a predator pit," reduce wild deer and elk populations, threaten livestock and pose a danger to residents and outdoor recreators.

"Introducing grizzlies into a [rural community](#) is tantamount to a despotic ruler keeping standing armies among the people in times of peace and quartering armed troops among them," Cindy Copping wrote.

Nadeau, who served as a game warden in the Bitterroot ecosystem and studied grizzlies in Glacier National Park, refuted some of those concerns. He said [food sources](#) are abundant in the Bitterroot, and grizzlies are unlikely to have an outsized impact on deer and elk.

As for human-bear conflicts, Nadeau said the Bitterroot population would likely remain so small that chances of even seeing a bear are scant.

"Bears are incredibly, incredibly adaptive and incredibly afraid of humans, and they're doing all they can to avoid us," Nadeau said.

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