

Press Release

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Conservation Groups sends 60-day notice of intent to sue to overturn grazing decision in Bridger-Teton National Forest where the federal government expects 72 grizzly bears to be killed because of conflicts with cattle

The Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Yellowstone-to-Unitas Connection and Western Watershed Project sent a 60-day notice to the Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today stating that they will file a lawsuit in federal district court to overturn a decision authorizing continued cattle grazing that will result in the deaths of an estimated 72 grizzly bears in 60 days if the federal government does not change their decision. The October 2019 decision by the Bridger-Teton National Forest's Pinedale District covers 267 square miles of national forests in the Upper Green River and Gros Ventre River drainages on the southern border of Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming.

"The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that 72 grizzly bears will be 'incidentally taken' -- which means 'killed' -- as a result of the Upper Green River grazing allotments between the 2019 and 2028 grazing seasons," said Mike Garrity, Executive Director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies. "It's an astounding decision by the Forest Service since federal district courts have ruled twice now that grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem still need to be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

"The reality is the courts ruled to protect the bears for very good causes. Due to isolation from other grizzly populations the Yellowstone bears may suffer inbreeding, which could lead to extinction of the Yellowstone Ecosystem's distinct grizzly population. Illegal lake trout introduction in the Park has significantly reduced populations of Yellowstone cutthroat trout, a traditional high-value grizzly food source. And finally, due to global warming the drastic die-off of white bark pines has decimated the seeds, another high nutrition traditional food source, forcing grizzly bears into less secure habitat where they are often shot and killed.

"We have tens of millions of cattle in America, but we only have about 700 grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem," Garrity explained. "There are

simple steps that ranchers can take to protect their cattle from grizzly bears that don't involve shooting every grizzly they see. The solution here is to better manage cattle grazing operations instead of trying to manage grizzly bears by killing everyone they see near a cow."

"In essence, the Forest Service has been and would continue to manage this huge grazing allotment area to the detriment of wildlife, water, fish, soil and native because of overgrazing by livestock," added Jason Christensen, Director of Yellowstone-to-Uintas Connection. "Natural diversity, including its myriad ecological relationships, is negatively impacted by livestock grazing, which includes accelerating succession of aspen and increasing the fire hazard in conifer forests.

"Over a decade ago, the Forest Service published a map outlining the higher elevation connections between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, the Uinta Mountains and the Northern and Southern Rockies," Christensen explained. "Historically, grizzly bears, lynx, and wolverine have all utilized these important travel routes, which were designated as a Regional and Nationally Significant Wildlife Corridor. Now, however, it's heavily fragmented with roads, timber sales, oil and gas development and livestock grazing while off-road vehicles push ever further into what used to be secure grizzly habitat. Yet, astoundingly, these issues were not seriously considered in the Environmental Impact Statement."

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is relying on voluntary conservation measures to minimize conflicts between grizzlies and livestock, which typically end up with bears being killed," said John Persell, Staff Attorney with Western Watersheds Project. "It also fails to consider the impacts of killing female grizzlies and the effect of that on the whole population.

Scientists consider the protection of female bears to be crucial to the recovery of grizzlies. The potential loss of so many females could be devastating to the population trajectory of the species because female grizzly bears do not typically give birth until five years of age. Because cubs stay with their mother for up to two years, a female only gives birth a handful of times in her lifetime.

To prevent the population from backsliding away from recovery, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Science Team established specific mortality limits for independent females, independent males, and dependent young. The Service's biological opinion offered no analysis of whether 72 grizzlies killed over ten years will

trigger these mortality thresholds in conjunction with other grizzly bear deaths in the region.

“We’re challenging this project in court because there’s simply no way to justify the projected deaths of 72 Yellowstone Ecosystem grizzly bears due to conflicts with domestic cattle,” concluded Garrity. “Although the National Environmental Policy Act requires federal agencies to conduct a comprehensive environmental analysis that takes into account impacts to wildlife and ecosystems, this project ignored significant factors that affect the grizzlies and offers no resolution of these conflicts. The 60-day Notice gives the Forest Service an opportunity to correct these deficiencies without resorting to a lawsuit. We truly hope it does.”

Please find the 60-day Notice attached.

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