April 30, 2018

Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Wildlife Division, Attention: Regulations
3030 Energy Lane
Casper, WY 82604

Re: Wyoming Grizzly Bear Draft Chapter 68 Hunting Regulations

Dear Director Talbott,

The following comments address Wyoming’s draft Chapter 68 Grizzly Bear hunting regulations. These comments are submitted on behalf of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition (GYC) which has offices in Jackson, Lander, and Cody, Wyoming and has worked on grizzly bear conservation issues in Wyoming for over three decades. GYC is based in Bozeman, MT and has over 90,000 members and supporters from within the Northern Rockies and across the country.

GYC’s mission is to protect the lands, waters and wildlife of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE), now and for future generations. The GYC was founded in 1983 on a simple premise: An ecosystem will remain healthy and wild only if it is kept whole and we advocate for the idea that ecosystem level sustainability and science should guide the management of the region’s public and private lands. This vast ecosystem includes 20 million acres of wild country that includes Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, parts of six national forests, five national wildlife refuges, and state and private lands in Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana.

The Greater Yellowstone Coalition works to ensure that a thoughtful and holistic approach is taken to managing natural and wildlife resources in balance with people and modern development. We work to shape a future where wildlife populations maintain their full diversity and vitality, where ecological processes function on public lands with minimal intervention, where exceptional recreational opportunities abound for visitors and residents alike, and where communities can enjoy a healthy and diversified economy.
Below are comments on individual elements of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department (WGFD) draft Chapter 68 Regulations for your consideration.

Consider Post-Delisting Hunting Delay
To be clear GYC opposes sport hunting of grizzly bears. We also realize that hunting is the most manageable threat that bears face. In 2017 alone, 56 bears were killed from various human conflicts in the GYE without hunting. Before introducing hunting, Wyoming should focus on reducing conflicts and maintaining a stable population.

We don’t believe hunting will reduce conflicts on a large scale or provide for “social tolerance” as has been promoted (Chapron et al. 2015). Studies on gray wolves post delisting have similarly not supported the theory that social tolerance increases with hunting (Treves et al. 2013). Also, the creation of hunting seasons is not likely to reduce conflicts between grizzly bears and people, as this theory has been rebuffed for black bears (Obhard et al., 2014). No current science supports the need for hunting grizzly bears as a biologically necessary tool to manage the population, unlike what may be seen in unmanaged ungulate species that can cause detrimental impacts to their habitat.

Hunting is a tool and one that we and other grizzly bear advocates knew could be implemented for grizzly bears. As a tool, it can be used as a scalpel or a hammer. A scalpel would have been delaying hunting, working with the surrounding states to have a unified approach (Montana did delay hunting for a future year), working to get the support of federal agencies who have the responsibility for the majority of the habitat used by bears, proposing a smaller portion of what is allowable instead of the maximum, studying the movement of bears across the boundary of the DMA, and really understanding what number is being proposed and how it interacts with the population estimate.

Finally, consistent with our past comments, we ask the WGFD Commission to require a 5-year moratorium on the hunting of grizzly bears. Rather than feed the narrative that states are rushing to hunt bears as soon as they are removed from the ESA, we ask Wyoming to delay the onset of hunting, as the State of Montana did this past March. Montana cited low allowable female discretionary mortality (a similar concern in Wyoming) and ongoing litigation as the justification for this decision.

Cautious, Careful, Coordinated Approach
Throughout the delisting process and over the past decade, WGFD has time and time again said how conservative hunting would be for grizzly bears in the event that they were delisted. Wyoming’s proposed hunting quota of 24 bears came as a shock to many who have followed this process. It led some to believe that Wyoming intentionally misled the public and that an aggressive hunt was always planned.

We have been told that hunting would be cautious, conservative, careful and coordinated throughout this process, but this proposal is contrary to that pledge. Within the Demographic Monitoring Area (DMA), ten
male bears and two female bears are proposed. This is the highest quota that could possibly have been allowed. It actually rounds up and exceeds mortality quotas assuming fractions of bears from Montana when their Commission has publicly stated that it wouldn’t allow other states to use its discretionary mortality as allowed within the Tri-State Memorandum of Agreement. http://fwp.mt.gov/doingBusiness/insideFwp/commission/meetings/agenda.html?coversheet&topicId=43562518

This is neither cautious or conservative, it is the maximum allowable, plain and simple. The proposal is designed to decrease the population and distribution of bears. The Commission should understand that if an additional three female bears had been killed last year, it would have prevented any hunting to occur at all in 2018 because it would have exceeded mortality thresholds. That is how fine the line is between a stable and decreasing population.

In the area “outside of the DMA” the proposal allows for up to 12 bears of any sex to be killed. This number has no justification. Biologists have no estimate of what the population is in this area. Almost every bear in this area spends a portion of its year within the DMA, the unmarked boundary that Wyoming is calling “suitable” habitat. This line is derived from bear observations and known locations and “kriged” using modeling tools to draw a non-linear boundary as an estimator of space. Hunters will be able to use their GPS devices to determine if they are inside or outside this line and that determines whether or not bears will be killed.

This has been defended as a loose correlation of the number of bears that are killed annually for conflicts. There is scant science that supports this justification. Hunting across a broad swath of Wyoming, randomly by hunters will not address specific conflicts associated with individual bears. The only way this proposal limits conflicts is by reducing bear distribution and density. This is exactly what is proposed by having no female mortality threshold outside of the DMA: systematically reducing the population over time and limiting the distribution of bears.

Issuing spot devices and GPS units may ensure that female quotas aren’t exceeded, but it also mechanizes hunting to allow for the maximum harvest within thresholds. Prioritized lists have not worked for bison hunting and have since been abandoned by Department because of the increased burden and uncertainty for Department staff and hunters alike. This highly complicated proposal for grizzly bear hunting is unnecessary and reckless in the first year post-delisting. WGFD should lower the quotas to a number that ensures thresholds cannot be exceeded and issue hunting licenses as it does for other species. This may mean that only one or two bears would be allowed to be hunted within the DMA. A conservative hunt would also have ignored the DMA boundary and drawn boundaries using known highways and landmarks as was done in hunt areas 1-6. In fact, these boundaries could be extended, removing hunt area 7 altogether and maintaining defensible quotas below the mortality thresholds wherever bears are hunted.
Below are public statements from WGFD that have appeared in the recent years leading up to this proposed hunt:


- A reasonable hunting season would target few bears. “I would argue if you were trying to be prudent and making forecasts with the data in hand, you would probably plan on killing no more than eight males in the entire ecosystem, maybe only four females.” [http://www.wyofile.com/on-cusp-of-delisting-grizzly-hunting-a-worry/](http://www.wyofile.com/on-cusp-of-delisting-grizzly-hunting-a-worry/)

- Nesvik says the estimate is conservative, and that the proposed limit would not decrease the total number of grizzlies, as has been the case with wolf hunting. [http://trib.com/lifestyles/recreation/grizzly-bear-hunting-regulations-proposed-in-wyoming-rules-would-allow/article_1bc88d7b-a01d-55f9-b14d-62bdf38ce615.html](http://trib.com/lifestyles/recreation/grizzly-bear-hunting-regulations-proposed-in-wyoming-rules-would-allow/article_1bc88d7b-a01d-55f9-b14d-62bdf38ce615.html)

- Wyoming hunting season quotas would need to consider bear deaths in other states, said Brian Nesvik, chief of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department’s wildlife division. “All states would have the same skin in the game, and if any of the three states’ management plan didn’t support maintaining a population, all would suffer,” he said. Wyoming officials may discuss a grizzly bear hunting season if bears are delisted, but nothing has been decided, and it would be a slow and deliberate process, Nesvik said [http://www.wyofile.com/grizzlies-risk-2-1-million-acres/](http://www.wyofile.com/grizzlies-risk-2-1-million-acres/)


- “We have not worked those details out,” Nesvik said. “But the demand for those licenses will be so high that there will be no option but to have a limited-quota type of drawing for those licenses. There’s no way we can make those general, over the counter — like for a mountain lion.” Wyoming’s grizzly hunting regulations, Nesvik said, will be “conservative in nature” and will seek to minimize the killing of sows, which drive the population size. “The line doesn’t necessarily mean that there’s no tolerance, or the commission is going to set some kind of a limitation.” Wyoming’s grizzly hunting regulations, Nesvik said, will be “conservative in nature” and will seek to minimize the killing of sows, which drive the population size. “The line doesn’t necessarily mean that there’s no tolerance, or the commission is going to set some kind of a policy where bears won’t be allowed outside the line,” Nesvik said. “That’s not the intent at all, I don’t think.” [http://www.jhnewsandguide.com/news/environmental/griz-hunting-wyo-readies-to-write-rules/article_6d142539-dcc8-524e-9804-861fe4295c8b.html](http://www.jhnewsandguide.com/news/environmental/griz-hunting-wyo-readies-to-write-rules/article_6d142539-dcc8-524e-9804-861fe4295c8b.html)

**Once-in-a-Lifetime Limitation, § 23-1-703(c)**

During the 2018 legislative session, the law requiring a once-in-a-lifetime limitation on grizzly bear hunting was modified giving the Commission the authority to make this determination. [http://www.wyoleg.gov/Legislation/2018/HB0058](http://www.wyoleg.gov/Legislation/2018/HB0058)

We ask that before the 2018 hunting season occur that the WGFD maintain the once-in-a-lifetime provision and clarify this regulation.

**Value of Ecotourism**

Grizzly bears are a remarkable conservation success story that illustrate the shift in our culture and society, from concerted efforts to remove carnivores from landscapes because of conflicts with early residents of the West, to efforts to restore bears to their native habitat. The recovery of grizzly bears has also brought with it a growing industry of ecotourism that generates hundreds of jobs and brings economic benefits to the state. In an around Jackson, these changes are very evident and as a community we clearly value grizzly bears more alive than dead. Visitor surveys show that wildlife, including bears, is one of the top draws to our visitors. Tourism is the number one driver of the local
economy in Teton County, and number two for the state. State sales tax from our county relies on tourism.

Governor Mead made many commitments through the delisting process in a December 2016 letter to then Secretary of Interior, Sally Jewel. (outlined below). To demonstrate the significance of grizzly bears on our local economy and in sales tax revenue that is generated for Wyoming, we ask the WGFD to consider these statistics:

- 75% of visitors rank bears as an important resource in their visiting Yellowstone. (2016 visitor use survey)
- In 2016, 4.25 million visitors came to Yellowstone National Park and tourism to Yellowstone National Park creates $680.3 million in economic benefits. (YNP, 2017)
- Observing wildlife in Grand Teton National Park is the number one ranking recreational activity of visitors (Williams et al, 2012)
- Yellowstone remits approximately $10 million annually in taxes to the State of Wyoming (AP, 2018)
- Travel generated spending in Teton County generates $1.2 billion dollars for our local economy. (WY Office of Tourism, 2016)

With these statistics in mind, contemplate that Wyoming is considering a hunting season that might produce a total of 24 grizzly bear tags in 2018 for resident and non-resident hunters. These licenses will generate less than $50,000 dollars in license revenue. The income generated from the hunting of grizzly bears will not come close to the economic benefits received by our state and community from tourism and opportunities to watch these animals in the wild, which is unique to western Wyoming.

Support for Hunt Closure Outside GTNP

The Department should be commended for proposing a significant hunting closure outside the eastern boundary of Grand Teton National Park, which also includes the John D Rockefeller (JDR) Memorial Parkway. We agree that hunting should not be focused on the boundaries of our National Parks and the JDR Parkway as Governor Mead committed through the delisting process. Those commitments from Wyoming include:

1.) Confer with National Park Service personnel on an annual basis regarding discretionary mortality and hunting;
2.) That Wyoming has no intentions to implement a hunting season within the JDR Parkway;
3.) And finally, that Wyoming plans to direct hunting and emphasize harvest in areas of high conflict, which typically occur a significant distance from the boundaries of National Parks (emphasis added).

The closure area is said to include all known locations of a small number of celebrity bears. It would be helpful to visualize and demonstrate this point with a map during the upcoming Commission meetings. Also, it’s important to note that the above commitments weren’t made to protect just individual bears. This significant closure area demonstrates the value that bears bring to the local and state economy and the
visitor experiences at GTNP. Increasing visitor opportunity to view bears by not hunting them within this corridor is significant beyond the lives of a few key individual bears.

**Additional Comments**
- Please expand the roadside no hunt area to ½ mile on either side of roads.
- Increase application fees to full-price license upon application similar to other species.
- Increase non-refundable application fee to $100 for both residents and non-residents.
- Require all edible portions of meat to be removed.
- Remove prioritized list and issue fewer licenses.
- Require hunters to carry bear spray.

**Questions for Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team (IGBT)**
We ask the Department, as a key member of the IGBT, to discuss and address the following questions related to our above comments. These questions can only be answered at an ecosystem scale and we feel it’s critical that this team of scientists consider these questions before moving forward with the proposed hunting season.

1.) What is the purpose of the DMA boundary? Can this line change over time with improvements to social tolerance or habitat security?

2.) What impact will bears killed outside of the DMA, particularly females, have on the overall GYE population? Will this create a population sink that wasn’t considered in its creation?

3.) How will mortality in 2018 due to hunting be factored into the 2018 population estimate? Does this shift survival rates that go into the Chao 2 population estimate? Does this bias the population estimate low on an annual basis, while allowing discretionary mortality outputs to remain based on the assumption that those mortalities due to hunting didn’t occur (or are considered “extra” under 2017 thresholds)?

4.) How will population demographics change with the proposed hunts and will current monitoring detect any changes?

5.) A mortality threshold ≥ 7.6 allows a population decline within the DMA. By maximizing 9% female mortality, how long will it take for the population to respond and the model to detect a declining population and future constricting of mortality. Can the population continue to sustain this level of mortality and remain stable?

6.) The 2017 delisting rule encouraged natural genetic connectivity. Does the proposed hunt shift the distribution of bears in any way to limit this goal?

**Conclusions**
On behalf of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, I appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments on Wyoming’s Draft Chapter 68 Regulations and the future management of grizzly bears in Wyoming. Wyoming has the opportunity to lead in wildlife management by not proposing a hunt in 2018, or by truly proposing a thoughtful, careful, coordinated hunt like the public was repeatedly assured the state would. Do we really want to be the state that brazenly takes on the ire of the world and implements the first state
sanctioned aggressive, not conservative or cautious, hunt of grizzly bears in 40 years? The underlying concern to summarize our comments is that the hunting quotas proposed are too high and would intentionally reduce the population and distribution of bears in Wyoming. This is unacceptable and confirms the worst fears of state management. Please consider modifying this proposal and I’m happy to answer any questions or discuss these comments further.

Respectfully,

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Citations


https://irma.nps.gov/Stats/SSRSReports/Park%20Specific%20Reports/Annual%20Park%20Recreation%20Visitation%20(1904%20-%20Last%20Calendar%20Year)


Williams, Pat Stephens; Darville, Ray; and Legg, Michael (2012) "Grand Teton National Park Focused Visitor Survey," University of Wyoming National Park Service Research Center Annual Report: Vol. 35, Article 8. Available at: http://repository.uwyo.edu/uwnpsrc_reports/vol35/iss1/8