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## **Government decides that Yellowstone grizzly bears no longer need protection**

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff

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Grizzly bears forage in a field of blueberries in Denali National Park in Alaska. NPS Photo/Jacob W. Frank

For more than 40 years, the grizzly bear in Yellowstone National Park has been protected by the national government. That will begin to change soon.

The Secretary of the Interior, Ryan Zinke, said this week that the agency intends to remove grizzlies living in the Yellowstone area from Endangered Species Act protection. As interior secretary, Zinke is in charge of the national parks, including Yellowstone. The change will be entered into the federal list of endangered species next week. It can take effect 30 days after that.

Several conservation groups and Native American tribes objected to the move. They feared delisting the grizzly would lead states to open up hunting season on the bears in the protected Yellowstone zone, which reaches into Idaho, Wyoming and Montana.

Jonathan Proctor is the Rockies and Plains program director for Defenders of Wildlife. He said Friday that populations of grizzlies remain in isolated ecosystems and need federal protections to continue so they can grow and connect with other populations to increase genetic diversity. Differences in the animals' genes is considered important to help the species survive.

### **Species Comeback Could Be Reversed**

The ongoing comeback of the Yellowstone population shows how we can bring a species back from the edge, he said. "But we are concerned about the actions of states after a delisting. We can't let the work of saving these bears go down the drain." Stan Grier, chief of the Native American Piikani Nation of the Blackfoot Confederacy, described the decision in cultural terms.

“This announcement is no doubt being celebrated by trophy hunters like Don Jr. and Eric Trump,” Grier said. He was talking about President Donald Trump's sons. Grier described the grizzly as a “sacred being that protects our sacred lands.” He added, “This is a struggle for the very spirit of the land.”

Hilary Cooley is a grizzly bear recovery coordinator with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Grizzly bears number close to 700 in what's known as the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, which expands well beyond the park's boundaries, she said.

She said that in 1975, the bears numbered about 130 — having been hunted and killed for decades prior. The protections of the Endangered Species Act allowed the grizzly population, which grows relatively slowly, to climb over the decades.

### **Grizzly Population Goals Have Been Met**

Now with the population more than five times what it was 42 years ago, the Fish and Wildlife Service has met its goals, Cooley said. Biologists with the agency believe they have given the bears a path forward for survival. Removing the Yellowstone population from the endangered species list, Cooley said, allows Fish and Wildlife to focus on helping hundreds of other species protected under the Endangered Species Act. They include other grizzly populations.

She said that there are about 1,000 grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and that the agency would next consider whether grizzlies in that region are ready to delist. There are four other areas in the Washington-Idaho-Montana area where grizzlies enjoy protection. However, in two of them, biologists haven't reported any bear populations. Grizzly bears as a species will remain protected under the Endangered Species Act in the lower 48 states. So once an area is delisted, bears would still be protected outside that area.

### **Too Soon For Bear Hunting**

Rebecca Riley is a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council. She said it's too soon to allow any kind of hunting. “This population is still so small that any hunting would be a problem,” she said. “We need the population to continue to grow.”

She said that can only happen by allowing the bears' population to expand and connect with other bears near Glacier National Park in Montana. But unlike wolves, which travel vast distances, grizzlies don't wander far. So making connections with other bears is a longer process.

Ben Nuvamsa, former head of the Hopi Native American tribe, was angered by the decision. In a statement, he called the move to delist the grizzly a step back "to the Old West frontier mentality." "The grizzly bear, historically, is a religious icon to virtually all tribal nations," he said. "The Fish and Wildlife Service promised us that it would conduct full and meaningful consultation with us, but it turns out, those were only empty promises."

### **The Only Grizzlies In California Are On Its Flag**

Grizzlies once numbered about 50,000 when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark explored the West in the early 1800s. As cities and towns expanded, the bear population declined steeply. Prior to being listed as endangered, the bears were subject to trophy hunts.

Several areas, including California, once had abundant grizzly populations. California, however, hasn't seen a grizzly since the 1990s, despite it being the symbol on the state's flag. Proctor said state actions after the bears are delisted remain a key concern.

Idaho lawmakers passed a law that would allow owners of pets and livestock to kill a grizzly if they believed the bear was threatening their animals. The law would apply within the Yellowstone ecosystem but outside the national park boundary. The law only changes after the grizzly is off the endangered species list. Proctor said laws like that suggest states won't think of the grizzly bear's long-term health. But if protections remain in place, he said, "then the grizzlies will do the rest" and continue to come back.