

Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee conference call: December 6, 2013, 1:00 p.m.

Meeting minutes: submitted by Tara Teaschner

Chairman Tom Ryder called to order a scheduled conference call of the Yellowstone Ecosystem Subcommittee at 1 p.m.

Tom Ryder: The purpose of us gathering today on the phone is to have a discussion concerning the food synthesis report that we received Monday of this week.

I want to complement Frank van Manen and the Study Team members who worked diligently to prepare this report and the strong analysis within the report.

It is not my intention today to ask for any kind of formal vote.

I hope that when we are finished today, in preparation for next week's IGBC meeting in Missoula, we have had a chance to hear from the agencies/individuals that had some concerns with moving the motion forward that YES approved in Bozeman November 7. After having the chance to see the completed report and analysis, we would like to get feedback and see if your concerns have been lessened.

Tom Ryder conducted roll call. The following members were present:

Tom Ryder, Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Tara Teaschner, Wyoming Game and Fish Department
Scott Barnett, Gallatin and Custer National Forests
Kevin Schneider, Grand Teton National Park and the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway
Dan Wenk, Yellowstone National Park
Jose Castro, Bridger-Teton National Forest
Brent Larson, Caribou-Targhee National Forest
Pat Flowers, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
Steve Schmidt, Idaho Department of Fish and Game
Gregg Losinski, Idaho Department of Fish and Game
Tom Rice, Montana Association of Counties - Beaverhead County
Loren Grosskopf, Wyoming County Commissioners Association - Park Co
Frank van Manen, USGS Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team
Nisa Marks, USFWS-Idaho
Chris Servheen, USFWS Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator
Mike Stewart, BLM - Wyoming
Dan Tyers, U.S. Forest Service
Steve Cain, Grand Teton National Park and the John D. Rockefeller, Jr. Memorial Parkway
Brian Nesvik, Wyoming Game and Fish Department

Tom Ryder: At the November meeting in Bozeman, YES members received presentations on whitebark pine ecology and genetics followed by Frank van Manen's presentation summarizing eight research

questions that were addressed. The presentations and analysis's were complete with the exception of research question five, "Has the number of human-caused grizzly bear mortalities increased as white bark pine resources declined?" At the time of the YES meeting, the analysis/final report of research question five was not at a stage where the final results could be presented to the same detail as the other seven questions.

When a formal motion was made at the YES meeting, representatives from Yellowstone Park, Grand Teton Park, Montana County Commissioners, and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks voted no. The primary reason for that no vote wasn't necessarily due to do with the data presented, but due to the fact that the final report was not out yet and they hesitated to support the motion until they and their staff had a chance to review the final results in the written report.

Synopsis of the finding in research question five by Frank van Manen.

Frank van Manen: What we looked at was the patterns in the data from 2000-2012 because that coincides with the white bark pine decline period. Our major question was, do we see a trend in the number of mortalities annually?

First of all, we did not see much of a difference in males and females, but we did see an increasing trend primarily outside of the Recovery Zone. There was a slight increase inside the Recovery Zone and a little bit larger outside the Recovery Zone. It is important to keep in mind that the effect size of that was relatively small. In a good white bark pine year, we are talking about a difference, over that 12 year time period, of an additional 3.5 bears that are killed annually. In a poor white bark pine year, we are talking about an additional 6.5 bears or so that would be killed in an average year, comparing 2000 to 2012. That gives you an idea of what effect we are talking about, in terms of how the number of mortalities have changed over time.

The bigger question is that, even though the increase is not very large, is the increase associated more with white bark pine or something else? The fact we do not see as much of an increase inside the Recovery Zone where white bark pine plays a bigger role than outside, tells us that the increase, especially the increase we see outside of the Recovery Zone, may be a function of population expansion, rather than an actual whitebark pine effect. They are difficult to separate and we recognize this in the report but there is certainly no suggestion of a strong whitebark effect.

What we also discovered is that there is still a positive effect from good white bark pine years. In good years, we still see lower mortality compared with poor white bark pine years. It still functions as the role we previously documented.

Tom Ryder: Call for questions from YES members.

Tom Ryder: The analysis seems fairly clear cut and straight forward. To add a point, while total mortalities have increased a bit, the logic you presented makes it pretty clear that it is occurring in areas that are mostly outside of the initial Recovery Zone.

When you refer to the Recovery Zone, you are referring to the original recovery zone, not the Primary Conservation Area or the new mortality threshold zone that we are in the process of rolling out for managing this grizzly bear population?

Frank van Manen: That is correct. What is now the Recovery Zone Boundary.

Jose Castro: When you mentioned, "outside of the Recovery Zone population expansion could also be another reason for some of that mortality", are you talking about male bears killing cubs to establish their territory and get rid of competition?

Frank van Manen: We have not seen much of that on the periphery of the distribution. We are seeing more of that in the core area actually, where males might be killing cubs; we have seen that in Yellowstone National Park for example.

On the outskirts, it is more related to conflict issues, with an expanding population and increasing numbers. In separate demographic analysis, we have demonstrated that population growth is pretty homogenous across the ecosystem now, compared to what it used to be, and so we are seeing an increase in numbers, particularly outside of the Recovery Zone and that's contributing to expansion and also to a larger number of mortalities. I am not saying that whitebark pine has no role in this, it might, but if we look at the numbers, what we call additive mortality over this time frame, the effect size is what I would consider pretty small. An important point that I haven't mentioned, it is not reflected in our survival rates for bears that are two years or older. Those survival rates have stayed the same for females and have actually gone up for males. In terms of interpreting that, it supports the notion that these animals/males on the outskirts are contributing to the increase.

Tom Ryder: Call for other questions related to the report, results, or analysis or other topics.

Tom Ryder: Hearing none, I would like to hear from each agency that voted no at the last YES meeting. After hearing this discussion today and having an opportunity to look through this report with members of your staff, are you feeling better about this process?

Dan Wenk: If there would have been a vote today, we would have voted in favor.

Tom Ryder: How about Grand Teton National Park?

Kevin Schnider: Our concerns too were largely procedural. If there was a vote today, we would have voted to proceed.

Tom Ryder: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks?

Pat Flowers: The same for us.

Tom Ryder: Montana County Commissioners?

Tom Rice: It was a procedural issue I was in question of, so I follow the other three.

Tom Ryder: Do any of the other agency representatives here, based now on a full review of the report, have any concerns that you didn't have before, that might make you consider a different outlook on the future of the bear population?

Hearing none, we can essentially say that the report has been accepted and the IGBC, during their discussion, can deliberate in whatever fashion with unanimous support from YES.

Brian Nesvik, Chief of Wildlife for the Wyoming Game and Fish Department will be assuming the role as chairman for YES.

Meeting adjourned.