

Selkirk-Cabinet Yaak Response to Public Feedback

Selkirk-Cabinet Yaak Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy Development Team

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On July 21, 2026, the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) asked for public review and feedback of a draft Conservation Strategy developed by state and federal agencies for grizzly bears in the Selkirk-Cabinet-Yaak (SCY) Area. The IGBC asked for feedback to focus on novel components of the strategy, most notably chapter 2, which describes a Demographic Monitoring Area (DMA) and identifies objectives and associated criteria for distribution, mortality management, and population-level genetic health.

During the public comment period the IGBC received 132 individual comments, 121 of which were via the comment portal. Many portal comments followed similar form templates. Eleven additional longer letters were received from the following organizations and individuals:

- Boundary County, ID
- Conservation Northwest
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Flathead Lolo Bitterroot Citizen Task Force
- Humane World for Animals
- Idaho Conservation League
- Idaho Farm Bureau
- Inland Empire Task Force and Alliance for the Wild Rockies
- Randy Rannow
- Steve Nadeau
- The Cougar Fund

The Conservation Strategy Development Team reviewed all public feedback and greatly appreciates commenters' interest in SCY grizzly bears.

In addition, state and federal agency representatives on the Conservation Strategy Development Team provided briefings to staff for the Kootenai Tribe of Idaho (KTOI), Kalispel Tribe of Indians (KTI), and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). CSKT representatives shared their initial preference that that the part of the Flathead Indian Reservation that is not included in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (west of highway 28/382) be added to the NCDE and associated Conservation Strategy as an alternative to adding to the SCY. The KTOI provided feedback and text suggestions on the draft and is considering becoming a signatory of the Strategy. Representatives of the KTI shared their initial feedback that the Kalispel Reservation be included in the SCY Area. The KTOI and KTI also supplied updated information on the Tribes' land ownership in the SCY. The Team recommends the Strategy include additional language regarding the tribal role in grizzly bear conservation regardless of whether one or more Tribes decide to join the Strategy as signatories.

This Response describes clarifying edits made to the Conservation Strategy and addresses key themes and issues raised in the feedback. Key feedback themes and topics include:

- Conservation Strategy Framework and the Distinction from Individual Agency Administrative Actions
- Relationship of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) Regulations, 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, and Recovery Criteria
- Relationship of USDA Forest Service Regulatory Changes and Federal Land Management Plans
- Coverage Area
- Relationship with the Tri-State MOA
- Demographics
- Connectivity and Range Expansion
- Agency Budgets
- Idaho State Lands Bear Management Unit (Selkirk PCA)
- Food Storage
- Incidental Trapping and Hunting of Other Species
- State Attitudes toward Grizzly Bear Conservation
- Climate Change
- Miscellaneous Topics

Conservation Strategy Framework and the Distinction from Individual Agency Administrative Actions

Feedback indicated a need for greater clarity about the relationship between the Conservation Strategy and Agency authorities and mandates under federal, state, and tribal law for grizzly bear conservation. The Conservation Strategy is not a standalone regulatory mechanism. Rather, it represents the signatory agencies' (referred to as the Agencies) joint commitments to provide habitat protections, conflict management, and monitoring to meet demographic objectives and support grizzly bears in the SCY Area. While many of the regulatory mechanisms and conservation measures are in effect now, a purpose of the Conservation Strategy is to describe grizzly bear conservation and management in the SCY Area when grizzly bears are no longer listed under the ESA.

Grizzly bear conservation is inter-jurisdictional and made possible through coordination of commitments and efforts, thus, there can be no single lead agency. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee (IGBC) has for many years supported development of conservation strategies by state and tribal wildlife agencies and state, federal, and tribal land management agencies. While it would be possible to aggregate individual plans that document how grizzly bears and habitat will be managed, the Agencies have chosen to produce this more strategic document encompassing the SCY Area.

Like the Conservation Strategies developed for grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone (GYE) and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems (NCDE), the SCY Conservation Strategy is a compilation of the conservation commitments and legally binding measures located in laws, regulations, and plans and orders of the individual Agencies. The adoption or revision of federal, state, and tribal regulations, administrative rules, and other legally binding measures, such as federal land and resource management plans, are subject to the laws, regulations, and administrative processes, including those for public review and feedback, that apply to the individual Agencies.

Relationship of the ESA Regulations, 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, and Recovery Criteria

Some feedback referred to recent changes in ESA regulations, such as those related to the definition of “harm,” proposed revisions to 4d exemptions from ESA “take” for grizzly bears, and delisting decisions. Each of these represent regulatory actions subject to their own notice and comment and do not change the Agencies’ conservation commitments described in this Strategy.

The overarching goal of the Conservation Strategy, and the signatory agencies, is to maintain and enhance the contribution of grizzly bears in the SCY Area to grizzly bears in the lower-48 States. The Strategy describes the coordinated management and monitoring necessary to achieve this goal. It is intended to remain in effect beyond any post-delisting monitoring period required by the ESA. This Conservation Strategy provides a cohesive reference document and operational umbrella for all signatory Agencies, but each signatory has its own legal process and authority to implement the Strategy. Changes to ESA regulations do not automatically amend the Conservation Strategy. Regulatory mechanisms described in the Strategy, such as federal land management plans and state and tribal laws and regulations, are also not automatically amended when ESA regulations change.

Some feedback referred to recovery criteria identified in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) 1993 Recovery Plan for grizzly bears in the lower-48 states. These documents serve different purposes under the ESA than the purpose of this Conservation Strategy (as described above).

Recovery plans under the ESA serve as non-binding roadmaps that outline the guidance needed to recover listed entities – they are advisory documents, not regulatory standards. Building on that principle, this Conservation Strategy applies to a broader area than the two individual recovery zones identified in 1993. While the 1993 Recovery Plan relied on the best available science at the time it was written, this Strategy incorporates updated scientific information to establish mortality thresholds, identify existing habitat protections, and describe monitoring approaches to maintain and strengthen the SCY Area’s contribution to grizzly bear conservation in the lower-48 states – even after grizzly bears in the SCY are no longer ESA-listed and beyond any post-delisting period required under the ESA.

Relationship of USDA Forest Service Regulatory Changes and Federal Land Management Plans

Some feedback referred to the proposed repeal of the Forest Service’s 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule and 2005 Travel Management Rules. As indicated in chapter 3, Forest Service land management plan components, including those for secure core, motorized route

densities, road construction, and habitat connectivity, will remain unchanged regardless of any national regulatory modifications. In addition, the Idaho Roadless Rule will remain unchanged. Repeal or modification of either of the two national regulatory frameworks does not modify existing land management plans or approved motor vehicle use maps. Any new road construction, motorized access designations, and plan amendments or revisions proposed by the National Forests within the SCY Area are, and will continue to be, subject to land management plan compliance, environmental analysis, public comment, and the Forest Service's commitments described in this Conservation Strategy.

Agency-specific land management plans identify the motorized access metrics that apply to the individual national forests, BLM lands, and national wildlife refuges. Those metrics include a combination of route density limitations and habitat security requirements. Unlike when the GYE and NCDE Conservation Strategies were first developed, the federal land management plans in the SCY Area have established regulatory mechanisms specific to grizzly bear habitat security. Thus, this Conservation Strategy refers readers and managers to the full federal and management plans for those details. In the SCY Area existing federal plans include:

- Colville National Forest Land Management Plan (USFS 2019)
- Idaho National Forest Land Management Plan (USFS 2015)
- Kootenai National Forest Land Management Plan (USFS 2015, as amended)
- Lolo National Forest Land Management Plan (USFS 1986, as amended) (currently under revision)
- Coeur d'Alene Resource Management Plan (BLM 2007)
- Kootenai National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (2011)
- Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan (2005)

Coverage Area

The Agencies have shifted from the 1993 Recovery Plan approach of assessing the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak primary conservation areas independently and chosen instead to use a single demographic monitoring area (DMA). The DMA includes federal, state, tribal, and private land across the two primary conservation areas and Zone A, which includes areas of higher human occupancy in the interlying Kootenai River Valley and Pend Oreille Basin. This shift in approach more effectively supports and assesses grizzly bears in the SCY geographic area, which is smaller than the GYE and NCDE.

Delineation and incorporation of a fixed DMA allows for a consistent area of monitoring and allows for comparable evaluation and assessment of grizzly bear demographics in the SCY area in perpetuity. In contrast to the GYE and NCDE, the SCY Area as a whole is capable of supporting fewer grizzly bears and does not contain enough geography or suitable habitat to support a highly resilient, independently viable population (FWS 2024). In addition, the distance between the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak PCAs is narrow (between 8 and 20 miles) and consists of the Kootenai River Valley and Pend Oreille basin, which is an area of higher human occupancy with increased potential for human-bear conflict. Recent monitoring information indicates overlap of range occupancy between the two PCAs, with individual male bear home ranges documented to include areas in both PCAs.

For these reasons, coordinated bear management and monitoring, and related habitat management and monitoring for a single DMA better supports the Agencies' objectives for sustaining grizzly bears in the SCY Area than does monitoring and managing the two PCAs completely independently. The DMA boundaries for the combined area were adjusted to align with the NCDE to avoid gaps in assessment coverage. As is the case with the NCDE and GYE, the SCY DMA does not include all areas of occupied range or residency by individual grizzly bears. By using a DMA specific to the United States, the Agencies' monitoring and management framework can also adapt to sustain demographic or habitat objectives independently of contribution from Canada if such actions were needed.

The Tri-State MOA

Feedback included comments about the Strategy's reliance on a Tri-State MOA that was not provided with the draft Strategy. The state wildlife agencies of Idaho, Montana, and Washington intend to apply a collective, coordinated approach to grizzly bears in the SCY, including coordination of demographic criteria conflict management, and monitoring. The state agencies determined it was more efficient to coordinate drafting and feedback on demographic criteria and monitoring collectively through the IGBC forum for the SCY Conservation Strategy before proceeding with finalizing an MOA.

Using this sequence, consideration of the MOA through the individual state administrative processes would then have the benefit of interagency vetting and public feedback, and the state agencies could finalize the MOA in alignment with demographic criteria and monitoring elements of the Strategy. This type of iterative approach was also used by Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming to adopt an MOA for coordinated management in the GYE. Once the state agencies have approved the Tri-state MOA for the SCY via their respective state processes, the agreement will be included as appendix C in conjunction with finalizing the Conservation Strategy.

Demographics

In response to feedback, the Conservation Strategy Development Team provided some text clarifications regarding demographics, such as the exclusion of grizzly bears in Canada from reconstructed minimum counts and the use of mortality thresholds tied to baseline population metrics.

Appendices A and B to the Strategy provide background information and explanation on the development of distribution units and on assessment of the SCY Area based on reconstructed minimum counts and corresponding mortality thresholds.

Distribution in the Primary Conservation Areas (Demographic Objective 1)

Some comments addressed changes in the geographic units used for assessing reproductive female occupancy. This Strategy uses the term "Distribution Units" for assessment of reproductive occupancy and the term "Bear Management Units" (BMUs) for assessment of secure habitat and motorized access criteria on national forest lands.

Under the 1993 Recovery Plan, the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide recovery areas assessed distribution of reproductive females based on BMUs that were divided into subunits for assessment of habitat criteria (such as secure core and motorized access). The 1993 Recovery Plan identified BMUs for the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak areas that were sized

comparably to the *subunits* in the GYE and NCDE. These smaller BMUs have been used to assess both reproductive female occupancy *and* habitat criteria. As discussed in appendix A to the Strategy, telemetry and other location data for the SCY PCAs indicate redundancy potential, with the smaller SCY BMUs extending to multiple units for the same reproductive female.

Appendix A describes how the Agencies took an intermediate approach in delineating distribution units for assessment of reproductive female occupancy in the SCY. Because of the small sample size and smaller number of unduplicated females with young that may be detected in the SCY PCAs, the Agencies chose not to extend distribution units to the larger scale of assessment used for female with young distribution in the NCDE and GYE.

The Conservation Strategy Development Team discussed adjusting the nomenclature in the SCY Area to match the GYE's and NCDE's BMU/subunit naming convention. However, the established land management plans in the SCY Area use the term BMUs for assessing and documenting plan compliance with the habitat criteria. Thus, the Agencies chose not to change the BMU terminology. Instead, the Agencies use the term distribution units (equivalent to GYE/NCDE BMUs) for assessing reproductive female occupancy in the SCY Area and continue to use BMUs for assessing habitat criteria (equivalent to the GYE/NCDE subunits).

Sustainable mortality levels (Demographic Objective 2)

Feedback addressed several aspects of the sustainable mortality level objective, including the description of sustainability, use of reconstructed minimum counts (including the geography included), and determination and assessment of mortality levels. A definition of sustainable mortality has been added to the glossary and clarifying language was added to chapter 2 and appendix B. Sustainable mortality levels will be estimated using population modeling and observed vital rates.

Clarifying language has been added to chapter 2 regarding the use of reconstructed minimum counts. Clarifying language has also been added to appendix B, which provides background information and explanation on the use of reconstructed minimum counts.

Appendix B also describes the development of corresponding mortality thresholds for independent females and for independent males across the entire SCY DMA tied to these baseline population metrics. This is a change in the approach from the independent assessments of the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak.

The assessment of the population and all minimum counts will rely exclusively on detections from within the United States. Because the reconstructed minimum count process requires a high level of certainty that each detection represents a different individual, any detection with a possibility of duplication is excluded. This conservative approach means minimum counts are likely to undercount bears and are dependent on monitoring efforts. Since the majority of detections originate from genetic samples—each producing a unique genotype—the likelihood of mistakenly counting the same bear twice is extremely low.

The methods and objectives outlined in the Strategy incorporate independent-aged female and male mortality, dependent young mortality patterns, cause-specific mortality, and spatially explicit mortality risk zones, either as thresholds for mortalities of independent-aged bears or as inputs into models to estimate sustainable mortality levels.

Because feedback indicated some readers interpreted language contrary to agency intent, the Agencies edited language in the Strategy related to mortality thresholds. The Agencies clarify that mortality thresholds are not intended to set objectives or targets for a number of grizzly bears to be removed for the purpose of population management. Instead, thresholds are a tool in this Strategy to evaluate the population, in this case through an assessment of total mortality. Use of these thresholds, along with monitoring of specific causes and locations of mortalities, supports appropriate proactive and responsive management actions, including management removals in response to conflict, and adaptive areas of emphasis of information, education, and outreach activities.

Some feedback addressed unreported mortality, including a suggestion to use reporting rates from British Columbia (McClellan, et al. 1999). However, the demographics and management frameworks in British Columbia are different than those applicable to the SCY Area. As explained in appendix B, in assessing mortality relative to thresholds, the Agencies will continue the protocol that FWS has been using for addition of unreported mortality for the SCY Area. Continuation of the current FWS protocol is used in concert with the conservatively reconstructed minimum count approach.

Long-term population-level genetic health (Demographic Objective 3)

Some feedback addressed monitoring for genetic health including monitoring interval. The Agencies will monitor parentage and gene flow on an on-going and continual basis. The 10- to 14-year monitoring interval only applies to analyses of population-level genetics. More frequent calculations, which will involve many of the same individuals from one year to the next, are unlikely to detect gradual changes that may occur across the entire SCY Area.

Connectivity and Range Expansion

Some feedback addressed connectivity among the two PCAs, the NCDE, GYE, and other areas of the unoccupied historic range.

With respect to connectivity among the two PCAs, the Agencies recognize there are practical limitations for grizzly bear occupancy in Zone A due to human occupancy and other land use considerations. The Strategy identifies regulatory and conservation measures, including active cooperation with partners, to maintain and improve the permeability of Zone A and increase capacity for naturally occurring genetic exchange among population core areas (e.g., see Montana State Grizzly Bear Management Plan, appendix H).

With respect to connectivity to the NCDE, the Agencies aligned the two DMA boundaries to avoid gaps in assessment coverage and identified a potential new secondary habitat area (SHA).

This Strategy is limited to the SCY Area. As with the NCDE and GYE, the SCY DMA does not include all areas of occupied range or residency by individual grizzly bears. However, grizzly bears in these areas are still the subject of protection and conservation under state and federal laws, with consideration for public safety and managing potential for human-bear conflicts.

On the larger landscape, the Agencies recognize the value of providing connectivity between grizzly bear population cores. Occasional migration between population cores of grizzly bears that breed and whose offspring survive is sufficient for functional connectivity. Functional genetic connectivity should not be interpreted as requiring one seamless group of animals

stretched across the entire landscape between population cores or that the density of bears be in the same inside and outside of the PCAs.

Supporting connectivity and dispersal to potentially suitable habitat in unoccupied historic range is addressed in other contexts. For example, on National Forest Service lands, the NFMA implementing regulations emphasize the importance of connectivity as a component of ecological integrity and land management plan components to support the movement grizzly bears between populations cores. This can be seen in the 2024 Preliminary Need for Change for the Lolo National Forest Management Plan revision, in which the Forest identified a need “to provide management direction that addresses the importance of habitat connectivity, landscape patch and pattern, and wildlife-linkage zones between landscapes ([USDA Forest Service 2024](#)).

In the absence of effective migration occurring naturally, or if monitoring indicates concerns with genetic health at a population level, the states are committed to translocate grizzly bears among population cores in Idaho, Montana, or Wyoming as needed. Potential translocation is a commitment as a contingency and not as a standalone strategy or substitute for continuing human-bear conflict management and other population and habitat conservation measures.

Agency Budgets

Some feedback addressed the fiscal ability of the Agencies to meet their commitments. Governmental entities are subject to the requirements of their respective executive and legislative appropriations. However, federal, state, and tribal agencies have invested in grizzly bear conservation in the SCY for decades and have developed partnerships to address personnel, infrastructure, and funding issues when they have occurred in the past. As indicated in the Strategy, state wildlife agencies agree to continue their roles in conflict management, information, education, and outreach, and to perform monitoring and data management to support the Strategy. This includes conducting monitoring and data management for the Strategy should FWS stop performing those functions.

Idaho State Lands Bear Management Unit (Selkirk PCA)

Some feedback addressed habitat criteria and food storage measures in the Idaho State Lands Bear Management Unit in the Selkirk PCA. As described in the Strategy, State endowment lands have a different legal framework than National Forest System lands. State endowment lands were accepted at statehood under the condition that they be managed in perpetuity to secure the maximum long-term financial return for the beneficiaries, public schools and other public institutions.

The State Land BMU in the Selkirk PCA consists largely of state endowment lands obtained by the state of Idaho through land exchange. These and other state endowment lands in the SCY DMA are managed primarily for timber resources for its beneficiaries. The National Forest System habitat metrics for habitat security and motorized access do not apply to the state endowment lands, just as they do not apply to private landholdings in other BMUs.

The Idaho Department of Lands, which manages state endowment lands, has adopted restrictions for public motorized access in the PCA, with enforcement for gate closures supported through an agreement with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game (IDL 2012). The Idaho Department of Lands has also recently adopted food storage requirements for all overnight visitors on state lands in the SCY DMA.

Food Storage

Feedback requested food storage requirements on all public lands in the DMA. The only public lands without food storage requirements are BLM lands. BLM lands comprise less than 1% of the DMA, which is a total of 14,000 mi². The Strategy was revised to clarify all Forest Service lands in Zone A are under food storage orders and indicate that the BLM will coordinate with the IGBC to develop and implement guidelines for sanitation and food storage as needed.

Incidental Trapping and Hunting of Other Species

Some commenters addressed the potential for grizzly bear mortality due to incidental trapping or hunting of other species. A review of 30 years of records and examination and monitoring of hundreds of grizzly bears indicates that trapping of grizzly bears while lawfully targeting other species is not a significant source of injury or serious mortality in the SCY Area or elsewhere in Idaho, Montana, or Washington. This includes a time period with longstanding year-round allowances for trapping of coyotes in Idaho and Montana, and wolf trapping seasons in Idaho, including the SCY DMA, since 2011, and in Montana since 2012.

All three states have an educational requirement for black bear versus grizzly bear identification that applies to black bear hunting in the SCY Area. Shooting of grizzly bears by private individuals except in defense of human life is unlawful in all three states, whether specifically intended or by misidentification.

The Tri-State MOA will include references to state regulatory mechanisms related to hunting and trapping activities.

State Attitudes toward Grizzly Bear Conservation

Some feedback expressed concern regarding the States' motivations in supporting the Conservation Strategy, overlooking the decades of constructive partnerships and long-term commitments.

For over 40 years, the States of Montana, Idaho and Washington, Tribes, and local communities have actively contributed to successful grizzly bear conservation in the SCY Area. This includes habitat conservation measures and acquisitions, active information, education, and outreach programs, conflict prevention and response, and interagency coordination through the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee and other forums. This Conservation Strategy represents a continued commitment by the States to maintain that productive interagency partnership into the future.

Climate Change

The Agencies do not expect habitat or climatic change scenarios to have significant negative consequences for the continued persistence of grizzly bears. Nevertheless, demographic thresholds are intended to be sensitive to any changes in population trajectories. Grizzly bears are dietary and habitat generalists with behavioral flexibility, characteristics that allow them to occupy the largest and most diverse global distribution of any bear species (Schwartz et al. 2003, Van Daele et al. 2012). Grizzly bears are expanding their range north in the high Arctic as well as south of Canada. In addition, the Agencies anticipate that grizzly bears will be able to adapt to any future potential changes in suitable habitat and food sources because they display great diet

plasticity and switch foods according to which foods are most nutritious and available (Servheen 1981, Kendall 1986, Mace and Jonkel 1986, Martinka and Kendall 1986, LeFranc et al. 1987, Aune and Kasworm 1989, Schwartz et al. 2003, Edwards et al. 2011, Gunther et al. 2014).

For example, despite a substantial decline of whitebark pine and natural stochasticity of other food resources within the GYE, grizzly bears have shown notable resilience by adjusting habitat use (Costello et al. 2014) and shifting diets to maintain body mass and condition (Schwartz et al. 2014, Ebinger et al. 2016). In a comprehensive synthesis study conducted by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Science Team, findings did not indicate a strong dependence of GYE grizzly bears on whitebark pine seeds; instead, grizzly bears used whitebark pine seeds where and when available, as one component of a diverse and dynamic diet (IGBST 2013).

Timing and frequency of human-grizzly bear interactions and conflicts may change (Servheen and Cross 2010, Kurth et al. 2024), and monitoring will continue to support adaptive management decisions. We expect that conservation plans and strategies with mortality limits will further limit any potential negative effects of climate change on grizzly bears.

Miscellaneous Topics

Supplemental Feeding of Black Bears in Washington (not occurring in the SCY)

A commenter referred to the use of supplemental black bear feeding on private timberlands in Washington in the spring to reduce damage to conifer stands from black bears peeling tender bark for food. Washington has not issued any permits for supplemental feeding on private timberlands in the SCY Area.

Definition of Translocation

One commenter referred to definitions of relocation and translocation used by Lackey et al. (2025). The Team does not think a differentiation between translocation (outside of home range) and relocation (inside of home range) is needed in this document. Home ranges are not identified for each individual bear. Any movement of bears for augmentation or genetic health purposes is likely to occur outside of a typical home range area. Movements of grizzly bears for conflict management may occur within or outside of a typical home range area, depending on circumstances.

Reporting

Under the Strategy, the SCY Monitoring Team will continue to make annual reports, including mortality and other demographic criteria. While FWS has issued separate monitoring reports for the Selkirk and Cabinet-Yaak, as divided at Highway 95, the Monitoring Team will provide a single report for the entire DMA beginning in 2027.

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