

Grizzly plan worries Washington state ranchers

Plan to bring grizzly bears to North Cascades

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

WINTHROP, Wash. — A few miles north of Winthrop, Don and Chris Lundgren make their living raising purebred Charolais cattle and hosting overnight guests for trail rides on horses or snowmobiles — depending on the season — at their Chewack River Ranch.

It’s a good life, a hard-working life, in the rugged beauty of Washington’s North Cascade Range.

But a plan by the National Park Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to reintroduce grizzly bears into the region has the Lundgrens and other ranchers, orchardists, backcountry outfitters and residents experiencing emotions ranging from concern to anger. They worry the huge predators will only make carving a livelihood out of the region that much more difficult.

The plan could be decided by year’s end. It got a big boost with the surprise endorsement in March of Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, who oversees both federal agencies.

Ranchers say they were shocked, baffled and angered by Zinke’s position and felt betrayed by the Trump administration, which they believed was on their side on the grizzly issue. Now many feel abandoned politically, that their voices don’t matter and are apprehensive about their future. Some say putting people’s lives and livelihoods at risk is just plain stupid.

“I don’t understand why people want to turn grizzlies loose where they will interact with thousands of recreationists, let alone our ranch. There’s not enough wildlife for them to eat. Deer are scarce. There are no elk and very few moose,” said Don Lundgren, 65, who has lived on the ranch all his life.

Grizzlies would have remained plentiful in the North Cascades if they had food, he said. Reintroducing them into a region where they will be short of food will only cause them to leave the high country for ranches, orchards and towns where they can get food, he and other residents reason.

He’s concerned for the safety of his cattle, his family and his ranch guests and that his business will suffer.

Part of his 44,000-acre grazing allotment is only a couple of miles from one of the proposed grizzly release spots, about 10 miles northwest of the village of Mazama. Grizzlies have a normal range of 60 miles.

The restoration of wolves in the state has not been “fair for wolves or people,” he said, adding that cougars are currently the main problem for his 200 mother cows and their calves.

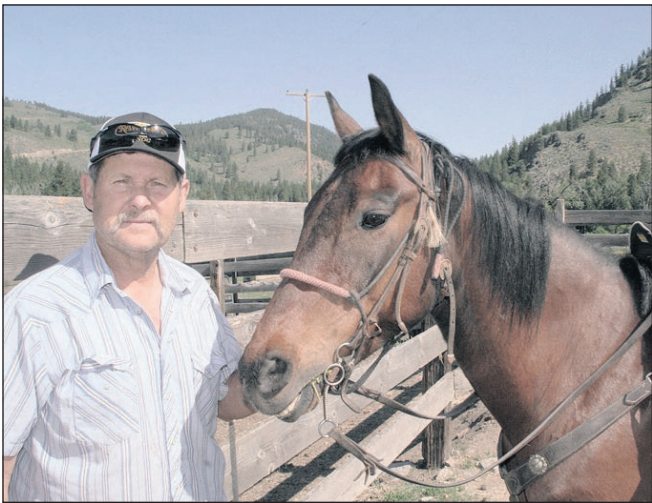
“There are thousands of people who hike up there in the Pasayten Wilderness (part of the North Cascades) and what will they do? There will be some dead people. It doesn’t make any sense,” Lundgren said.

Grizzly worries

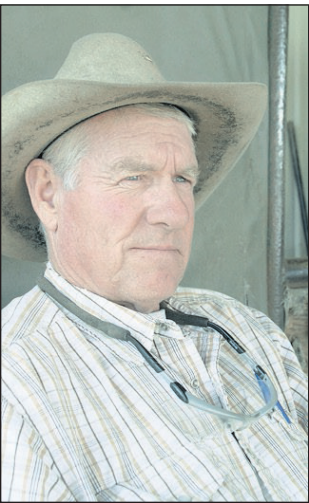
Steve Darwood, co-owner of Cascade Wilderness Outfitters and North Cascade Outfitters in Carlton, agreed the North Cascades is not good grizzly bear habitat.

“People deserve a choice. If they want to see grizzlies they can go to Yellowstone (National Park). I have customers who come here from Montana because they can enjoy the high country without the worry of grizzlies,” Darwood said. “This will keep people out of the high country.”

Darwood, 63, has been an outfitter for 50 years. Each year he takes about 200 customers, most of them 55 and older, on horseback into the Pasayten Wilderness on deluxe trips where horses, gear, food and



Photos by Dan Wheat/Capital Press
Don Lundgren at his Chewack River Ranch near Winthrop, Washington. He says he has problems with cougars and wolves and doesn’t need grizzlies.



Steve Darwood, owner of Cascade Wilderness and North Cascades Outfitters in Carlton, Washington.

Grizzly bear

- Binomial name:** *Ursus arctos horribilis*
- Height:** 3½ feet at the shoulder, 7-8 feet tall standing upright
- Weight:** 300-800 pounds depending on age, sex and season
- Average life span:** 20 -25 years
- Appearance:** Unlike black bears, grizzlies have a concave face, rounded ears, high-humped shoulders and long, curved claws. Their fur ranges in color from light brown to nearly black.
- Diet:** Omnivores, about 80 to 90 percent of their diet consists of green vegetation, wild fruits and berries, nuts, and bulbs or roots of certain plants. A portion of their diet may include insects, fish and small mammals. Grizzlies will sometimes take larger game such as elk or moose calves and have been known to take livestock.
- Behaviors:** A grizzly must eat enough to build up huge stores of fat to sustain it through hibernation. They typically den in November and emerge in April.
- Known for:** Their impressive size and strength. Grizzlies can sprint 50 yards in 3 seconds, faster than a race horse.
- Range:** Today the grizzly bear is found in about 2 percent of its historic range in the lower 48 states; in pockets of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and Washington. Large populations remain in Alaska and Western Canada.



Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

cooking are provided.

“Most of the people who support grizzly restoration are people who will never enter the wilderness,” he said. “It’s just like the wolf program. The west side of the state is in favor of it until a bill passes to introduce wolves on the west side. Then they’re not so in favor.”

Vic Stokes, 64, a Twisp rancher and past president of Washington Cattlemen’s Association, is still recovering from the loss of 100 mother cows, 100 calves and 30 replacement heifers in the Carlton wildfire of 2014. This season is his first back on grazing allotments that have recovered from the fire.

“I think it’s somewhat misguided,” he said of grizzly reintroduction. “Nobody has convinced me it’s necessary.”

His grazing allotments are 18 to 20 miles from proposed grizzly release points.

“People say you’ll learn to live with them. I don’t want to live with grizzlies. I’ve done just fine without them,” he said. “I’ve talked with ranchers over by Yellowstone and they’re a pretty aggressive animal.”

Stokes said he would hope President Donald Trump, if educated about the issue, would turn Zinke around.

Ranchers near other towns with grazing allotments in the high country could also be impacted.

Several ranchers in those areas didn’t want to be quoted by name, saying they fear retribution from federal agencies. They said no one listens to them, that they’re dealing with wolves harassing and attacking their cattle and don’t want grizzlies, too.

“It’s too bad Zinke threw all of us under the bus to kowtow to environmentalists. That just blew me away. I thought he was a good guy. He’s still a politician. Follow the money,” said one rancher. “It never ends between the fish to take our water and wolves to eat

our cows and now grizzlies. It never stops.”

He called one conservation group “homeland terrorists” who are “trying to kill agriculture.”

Other views

Mazama store owner Missy LeDuc, 54, said National Park Service personnel say grizzlies will stay to themselves in remote areas and not be a problem.

“I feel it’s OK, but I’m not an expert,” LeDuc said. “I’m an avid back country hiker and I would be concerned about running into a grizzly for sure.”

Grizzlies have not been a big topic among Mazama’s few residents, she said, adding that her sense is residents are not looking forward to it.

She said she doubts it would affect her business since most tourists drive through and at most take short day hikes.

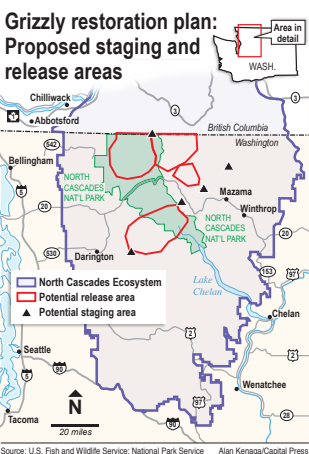
However, Patrick Murphy, 23, who works at Goat’s Beard Mountain Supply in Mazama, said reintroduction is a great idea because grizzlies are native and “a vital part” of the ecosystem.

“A lot of the outdoor community is OK with it and understands having predators in the ecosystem,” he said. “Ranchers oppose, which is understandable.”

He hikes in Alaska where “there’s a constant threat of grizzlies,” finds it “exciting” and “enjoys the thrill.”

The shop sells hiking, climbing and cross-country ski gear, and business could be hurt by grizzlies, he acknowledged.

Alaska has 30,000 grizzlies, the most in North America, according to the state Department of Fish and Game. British Columbia has about 15,000 grizzlies, according to the province’s Ministry of Forests,



Lands and Natural Resource Operations.

The lower 48 states are home to 1,400 to 1,700 grizzlies, with an estimated 800 in Montana, 600 in the Yellowstone and Teton area of Wyoming, 70 to 100 in northern and eastern Idaho and “fewer than 20” in Washington’s North Cascades, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The 2017 Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the North Cascades by the Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service states there has been “no confirmed evidence” of grizzlies in the North Cascades since 1996 and the population status is unknown. Four detections of grizzlies in the past 10 years were on the British Columbia portion of the North Cascades, the draft states.

Grizzlies have been listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act since 1975.

Plans, release points

The Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service have been studying North Cascades restoration for 30 years or more.

Eric Rickerson, 51, the Fish and Wildlife Service state supervisor in Lacey, says the agency has a responsibility to restore endangered species and wants to do it with minimal impact on people.

“The last thing we want to do is put a handful of bears into an area that quickly leads them to a valley bottom with humans. We have to be cautious about that,” he said.

The draft presents a no-action alternative and three action alternatives whose goal is restoring a population of 200 bears over 25 to 100 years. Bears would be brought in from Montana and British Columbia.

The draft proposes five grizzly release spots, at the north end of Ross Lake near the Canadian border, three within 20 miles of Mazama and one 15 miles east of Darrington.

Darrington residents say the Green Mountain Trail is one of few day hikes in the area but would no longer be safe with grizzlies.

Rickerson said he thinks release zones will be revisited, with a focus on finding more remote areas. Grizzlies eat a lot of plants and recent research shows there is sufficient habitat in the North Cascades for 200 to 300 grizzlies, he said. People are more the cause of the grizzly decline than loss of habitat, he said.

Opponents maintain habitat is scarce and will force griz-

zlies into populated areas.

“In Montana, grizzlies can come right down the White River to the valley floor and still be in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Here they will come down to the valley floors and find ranches, orchards, people and towns,” said Jim DeTro, 70, an Okanogan County commissioner.

An example, he said, was a black bear captured in April by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife in the town of Okanogan, the county seat. The bear was relocated to the Colville Indian Reservation, from where it had come.

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Sgt. Dan Christensen, 49, said the department traps six to 12 black bears a year, mostly in spring and fall.

“In the spring (when they come out of hibernation) they’re starved of calories and go wherever they can for first food,” he said. “They’re looking for the quick and easy. Our garbage is a good source and their noses are phenomenal.”

Most everyone he knows, DeTro said, doesn’t want grizzlies.

DeTro and former commissioner Craig Vehraska, an Omak rancher, say a University of Montana professor and bear expert who visited the area in 2004 thought it ideal for grizzlies — but that tree fruit would attract them “like honey.”

“Grizzlies come out earlier in the spring than typical black bear. They’ll be in the snow and that will force them down valleys,” Vehraska said. “I don’t think it’s a wise move at all. We already have a bit of a bear problem with ... black bears. If we turn too small a calf out (to summer range), they just don’t come back. Bear, cougar or wolves get them.”

Christensen said orchards attract bears, especially in

recent years as growers leave more fruit on the ground.

“It’s a huge food source and sometimes you see a drunk bear from the apples that have fermented on the ground. We had five bears in a tree in an orchard along the river in Omak. The orchardist was concerned because pickers needed to pick pears,” he said.

But Harold Schell, variety research and development manager for Chelan Fruit Cooperative, said overall bears are not a big problem. “They come down in the fall when the fruit’s ripe. They may damage a few trees, but it’s pretty insignificant,” he said.

Keith Stennes, a Methow grower, said periodically a bear dines in his pear orchard but it’s never been a problem.

More comment

U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., whose district includes Okanogan County, strongly opposes reintroduction plans. In an April letter to Zinke, he asked that a public comment period be reopened so “local residents who were ignored can be heard.”

Residents were not allowed to express their concerns at a March 2015 public forum in Okanogan and were poorly treated by federal employees, Newhouse said.

Grizzlies will negatively impact ranchers, recreationists and rural economies and their reintroduction violates state law, Newhouse wrote. The law directs the state Fish and Wildlife Commission to protect grizzlies and encourage natural regeneration but prohibits their transplanting or introduction into the state. Federal agencies say federal law supersedes state law.

A Newhouse spokesman said the congressman is “coordinating with the (Interior) Department on his request.”

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