



January 31, 2023

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Attn: Public Comment
1420 East Sixth Avenue
P.O. Box 200701
Helena, Mt 59620-0701

Via email to: fwpwld@mt.gov

Re: NRDC and NPCA comments on Montana Grizzly Bear Management Plan Draft 2022

To whom it may concern:

On behalf of our more than 13,000 combined members and supporters in Montana, the Natural Resources Defense Council (“NRDC”) and the National Parks Conservation Association (“NPCA”) submit the following comments regarding Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ (“FWP”) draft Grizzly Bear Management Plan 2022 (the “Draft Plan” or “Plan”). People living in Montana and throughout the United States value grizzlies as an iconic and uniquely valuable North American species, and recognize Montana as one of the few places left where grizzlies can still live in the lower 48 states. As noted in the Draft Plan, Montanans are largely united in their belief that grizzlies belong in Montana and are part of what makes this state special.¹ FWP has played, and will continue to play, a critically important role in stewarding grizzly recovery and management of these bears that were once nearly extinguished from the landscape.

Our organizations have worked for decades at the federal, state and local levels to support grizzly bear recovery in the Northern Rockies. Importantly, we have dedicated time, energy and resources to supporting local communities in their proactive efforts to live with bears, specifically through advancing conflict prevention programs. Ensuring a future for a healthy, resilient, and recovered grizzly bear population will require a deep commitment to collaboration, cooperation and partnerships to advance solutions that allow people and bears to safely and successfully share the landscape. The American public has invested hundreds of millions of dollars to recover the grizzly over the past 40 years. By working alongside Montana residents and local partners, we can ensure grizzly bears continue on the path of recovery. In doing so, we will protect Montana’s legacy as one of the last wild landscapes in the United States.

Unfortunately, as currently written, this Draft Plan does not adequately secure a long-term vision and sustainable regulatory approach for a recovered grizzly bear population. Our most significant concerns

¹ Nesbitt, H.K., A.L. Metcalf, and E.C. Metcalf. 2020. Human dimensions of grizzly bear management in Montana. Descriptive statistics from a statewide survey of MT residents. Submitted to Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. University of Montana Frank College of Forestry.
https://www.cfc.umt.edu/research/humandimensions/files/hd_grizzlybear_report20200323.pdf.

with the Draft Plan relate to the state’s proposed treatment of bears outside of core areas and an overemphasis on lethal management tools—in particular hunting—rather than proactive strategies to help meet the needs of people and bears, especially in areas important to genetic connectivity and dispersal. We recommend the state make the following overarching improvements, which we elaborate on in the comments below:

- **Make a stronger commitment to facilitating natural connectivity between grizzly bear populations.** The state should place greater value on the bears that live in between core areas, recognizing that these bears will be key to advancing the connectivity goals stated in this Draft Plan. Achieving and maintaining natural connectivity will require a deeper and clearer commitment to education and outreach, as well as support for residents, communities, recreationists, and other entities to avoid human-bear conflicts. We do not oppose human-assisted movement of bears, but human-assisted movement should only be considered as a secondary and supplemental strategy to the primary strategy of establishing and maintaining natural genetic connectivity. This primary strategy should facilitate bears’ ability to safely travel between recovery areas and reproduce successfully without human assistance.
- **Prioritize conflict prevention, education, and outreach as key management strategies anywhere bears are or may be present to benefit both communities and bears.** Rather than focusing on responding to conflicts with control, the state should prioritize investment in working with partners to secure a safer landscape for people and bears by reducing attractants and preventing conflicts. These efforts are valuable to both humans and bears anywhere grizzly bears may be present—even in areas where connectivity between core areas is unlikely.
- **Adopt a broader definition of “occupied range” and “geographic setting” for this Plan to value bears where they currently are and where they may be now and in the future.** The current Draft Plan’s “occupied range” statement is vague and the occupied range maps adopted in the Plan do not accurately reflect the current distribution of grizzly bears and where they may be present now in the state. Similarly, the geographic setting does not include all counties where bears are or may be present. These areas are very much affected by this Plan and the state should commit to including the needs of these bears and communities as well. This should be rectified by adopting maps and definitions that reflect the latest and most comprehensive information on where bears are or may be present.
- **Remove the emphasis on grizzly bear hunting and recognize its limitation for achieving any management objectives.** FWP’s Draft Plan focuses on justifying a hunt by primarily highlighting the alleged benefits of a potential hunt without valid evidence and with little effort to evaluate the costs of a potential hunt, which are numerous. This emphasis has placed unjustifiable weight on hunting versus other strategies (e.g., conflict prevention, education and outreach, building and maintaining connectivity) in the state’s management approach and this is reflected throughout the Draft Plan. Grizzly bear hunting is not necessary to manage grizzly bears, particularly in relation to the management of human-bear conflicts and human safety. This is clear after decades of grizzly management with no hunting in Montana. We encourage the state to step away from its emphasis on hunting, recognizing that this is not necessary to managing bears and that the costs will outweigh the benefits. If a bear hunt ever takes place, we urge the state to use a high degree of caution, and we strongly oppose allowing hunting in any connectivity areas. Allowing hunting in connectivity areas is counterproductive to FWP’s stated goals of establishing connectivity between recovery areas.
- **Commit to meaningful partnerships and consultation with Tribes, who have valuable perspectives on grizzly bears and contributions to management approaches.** There is a notable lack of acknowledgment of the role of Tribes in this Plan and the accompanying EIS, including a lack of integration of their perspectives and a lack of recognition for the important

leadership role Tribes are currently playing and will play in the future of grizzly bear recovery. We urge FWP to address this gap in the Plan.

- **Acknowledge the risks recent and forthcoming legislation pose to grizzly bears and to FWP’s ability to effectively manage for a secure and recovered population.** New and expanded recreational hunting and trapping activities exist because of laws passed by the Montana legislature, including those passed into law prior to the release of this draft for public comment and some that may become law as a result of the 2023 legislative session. This is a serious omission that needs to be added to this Plan. These activities—including hound hunting of black bears and wolf trapping with snares, traps, and bait—present increased lethal risk for grizzly bears in Montana and could result in higher mortality and reduced connectivity opportunities. The resulting conflicts and grizzly bear deaths will erode the adequacy of the mortality management systems proposed by FWP in this Plan. While we recognize that FWP cannot change state laws, the agency needs to address the impacts of recently or soon-to-be-passed laws in the Draft Plan and limit the applicability of laws within its authority in order to adequately regulate the mortality of grizzly bears in Montana, as required for eventual delisting.
- **Plan for necessary long-term monitoring and research, including in connectivity areas, using the best available scientific methods to track bear population trends and management outcomes.**

Specific Comments (all page numbers referenced are in the Draft Plan):

Pg. 6 – *“FWP’s Preferred Alternative does not manage for grizzly bear presence outside of core areas, where the likelihood of conflict is elevated and legitimate concerns about human safety become the single highest priority.”*

COMMENT: It is contradictory for FWP to say it will not manage for grizzly bears outside of core areas and then say connectivity is a fundamental principle that will guide management. Connectivity will require consistent bear presence in between core areas. This line also fails to emphasize the importance of conflict prevention efforts, which will be critically important to bears and people both within and outside of core areas. The first sentence should be changed to: ***“FWP’s Preferred Alternative will manage for grizzly bear presence outside of core areas with the objective of preventing conflicts, and grizzlies that do get into conflict outside core areas will be managed as necessary.”***

Pg. 6 – *“Thus, grizzly bear presence would not be an objective in areas far from their largely mountain habitats and in prairie habitats where agricultural development predominates. Individual animals in these areas could be accepted to the degree they remain conflict-free.”*

COMMENT: This sentence should be changed to: ***“Individual animals in these areas will be accepted if they remain conflict-free.”*** The original sentence suggests that FWP could actively remove bears that are conflict-free. This is not an acceptable management policy for a resident state native species, because it justifies the persecution and elimination of bears that are conflict-free just for living outside core areas. Such a statement is harmful to grizzly bear recovery and is counter to the mission of FWP.

Pg. 8 – *“Role of grizzly bears in Montana - Between core populations, FWP would manage for a significantly lower density of grizzly bears to provide opportunities for connectivity.”*

COMMENT: By stating that FWP will manage for a significantly lower density of grizzly bears between core areas, FWP implies it will increase grizzly mortality as a management policy in connectivity areas to reduce the number of bears in these areas. This is counterproductive and will

not facilitate long-term recovery. By doing this, FWP will reduce the probability of connectivity ever occurring. This sentence should be changed to ***“FWP will work with local residents, communities, and NGO partners to manage for reduced human-bear conflicts in order to provide opportunities for bears to live in these areas with minimal conflicts and to enhance the probability of connectivity.”***

Pg. 8 – *“Role of private lands in grizzly bear conservation and management. Where grizzly bear expansion does not contribute to connectivity, FWP would have lower tolerance for grizzly bears involved in conflicts.”*

COMMENT: This sentence should specifically state that FWP will not remove grizzly bears from private lands just because they exist there. This sentence should be changed to: ***“Where grizzly bear expansion does not contribute to connectivity, FWP would have lower tolerance for grizzly bears involved in conflicts, but FWP will not proactively remove bears from such areas if they are conflict-free.”***

Pg. 9 – *“Destinations of a bear captured in a conflict setting when moving it away from the site is recommended and FWP is allowed to move it under state law (i.e., captured inside RZ): As the known range of grizzly bears changes, FWP would continue to engage with the Commission to gain pre-approval of new sites within Occupied range to which grizzly bears could be moved but would not seek approval of new release sites beyond the most recently updated Occupied range.”*

COMMENT: This “Occupied range” statement is vague. There are many grizzly bears present in areas outside the Occupied range maps in Appendix G. The Occupied range maps in Appendix G are different than the map produced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on 6/23/22 and developed with Montana FWP and federal partners: <https://www.fws.gov/media/grizzly-bear-may-be-present-map>. The potential sites for bears that could be relocated should not be limited to the Occupied range maps shown in Appendix G because these maps do not represent the current grizzly distribution and occupancy in Montana. The maps in Appendix G should be updated to reflect the current distribution of grizzly bears and where they may be present in this FWS link: <https://www.fws.gov/media/grizzly-bear-may-be-present-map>.

Pg. 10 – *“Moving non-conflict bears to areas outside of Occupied range: If FWP proposes to move a bear into unoccupied habitat for purposes of recovery or connectivity, it will first complete an environmental analysis and seek approval from the Commission.”*

COMMENT: On Pg. 8, FWP states: *“Statewide objectives would include a low density of grizzly bears between RZs or DMAs that could provide connectivity opportunities.”* However, on Pg. 10 FWP says: *“If FWP proposes to move a bear into unoccupied habitat for purposes of recovery or connectivity, it will first complete an environmental analysis and seek approval from the Commission.”* These statements are in conflict. Movement of a bear requires rapid decisions, translocation, and release, which is impossible if such an action requires an environmental analysis and approval of the Commission. This section should be rewritten along with the updating of the maps in Appendix G. If FWP has an objective of *“...a low density of grizzly bears between RZs or DMAs that could provide connectivity opportunities,”* then this Plan should articulate a framework for the necessary analysis and Commission process so that the state is prepared to rapidly respond and implement such grizzly movements into areas between RZs or DMAs.

Pg. 10 – *“A potential grizzly bear hunt: Functions, expectations, regulations. If delisted and a hunting season is adopted by the Commission, it could be used to limit expansion where core connectivity is unlikely (particularly in Central and Eastern Montana), but it would be consistent with maintaining an appropriate density of grizzly bears where connectivity is prioritized.”*

COMMENT: Hunting grizzly bears in connectivity areas is inappropriate and inconsistent with the goal of facilitating connectivity. The few bears that move into connectivity areas should not be further reduced by a grizzly hunting season. If FWP is serious about connectivity and is committed to promoting it, FWP will not allow grizzly hunting in connectivity areas. This sentence should be changed to: ***“If delisted and a hunting season is ever adopted, grizzly hunting would be prohibited in all connectivity areas between core areas.”***

Pg. 11 – *“Motorized access management: FWP would take the view that, outside of areas with specific road density standards, grizzly bears can coexist with humans in areas with moderate amounts of motorized access if attractants are well managed, conflicts are minimized, and mortality of grizzly bears is sufficiently low.”*

COMMENT: This sentence should be reworded to say ***“...conflicts are minimized, and mortality rates of grizzly bears from both discretionary kills (hunting) and non-discretionary kills (management removals, illegal kills, self-defense kills) are sufficiently low.”***

Pg. 13 – *“‘Genetic connectivity’ refers to situations in which neighboring populations exchange individuals and gene flow is achieved through reproduction of immigrants (and their descendants). ‘Demographic connectivity’ refers to situations in which neighboring populations exchange individuals and immigrants (and their descendants) contribute significantly to population dynamics.”*

COMMENT: It would be useful to indicate that for animals like grizzly bears—that have differential dispersal rates by sex and age—genetic connectivity can be achieved by movements of males who can mate with females in the target population and move genetic material between areas by doing so. Natural movement of males should be a management priority for achieving genetic connectivity. Demographic connectivity increases population productivity, which is the increase in numbers of reproducing females in a population. Demographic connectivity can be achieved by the movements of typically subadult or adult females (which is more likely to require human assistance) because adult females are usually resident in their existing home range and unlikely to disperse very far from their mother’s home range.

Pg. 31 – *“Moving bears to initiate new or to support existing populations. The action of moving grizzly bears from one population to another to increase the latter’s abundance, genetic diversity, or both is known as augmentation. The USFWS has formally proposed augmentation to move bears from other areas into the two established Recovery Zones lacking populations (the Bitterroot, and the North Cascades in Washington State), but implementation of both proposals has been placed on hold.”*

COMMENT: This section confuses augmentation—which is movement of bears into an existing population to advance recovery efforts—with reintroduction—which is movement of bears into an area where grizzly bears no longer exist to create a new population. The FWS has not proposed augmentation into the Bitterroot or North Cascades ecosystems. The FWS did propose reintroduction of grizzly bears into the Bitterroot ecosystem in 2000, but this effort was never implemented. The FWS has not completed the EIS process in the North Cascades to reach a decision on whether to propose reintroduction into that ecosystem. The FWS and FWP have been working in partnership since 2005 to augment the existing small grizzly population in the Cabinet/Yaak ecosystem. This Plan should clearly define augmentation in comparison to reintroduction.

Pg. 40 – *“Grizzly bears are both “conflict prone” and “conservation reliant” (with the latter term meaning they will always require intensive management).”*

COMMENT: A species is conservation reliant when threats that it faces can never be eliminated, but only managed.² This means that the threats to grizzly bears must always be managed, not the bears themselves. Grizzly bears are not “conflict prone,” but human activities can draw them into conflict. In other words, grizzly bears only become involved in conflict when management agencies and the public fail to secure attractants or otherwise create threats for grizzly bears to navigate. This sentence should be changed to: **“Grizzly bears are a “conservation reliant” species, meaning that the human-related attractants and human-related threats to grizzly bears must always be mitigated through intensive management.”**

Pg. 40 – *“However, grizzly bears at lower density in some areas between these cores will facilitate connectivity. As those bears will live closer to people, they must be able to adapt to that reality, and will likely have a higher probability of suffering human-caused mortality.”*

COMMENT: Conflict prevention efforts are necessary everywhere that grizzlies are, or may be, present. The second sentence here should be improved as follows: **“As those bears may live closer to people, there must be efforts in place to reduce human-bear conflicts, and FWP will work to reduce these triggers of human-caused mortality. The maintenance of grizzly bears in connectivity areas is a priority of this Plan and FWP will work to achieve this with conflict prevention efforts, minimizing discretionary mortality, prohibiting grizzly hunting in these areas, and with enhanced outreach and education to help people live with bears.”**

Pg. 40 – *“Numerical objectives.”*

COMMENT: There is nothing in this section about the importance of monitoring and reporting systems and confidence intervals for estimating population size. There is also nothing in this section about monitoring and reporting vital rates such as adult female survival, which can be monitored with marked bears and is a primary determinant of population trajectory and health. While the Plan does not need to set numerical objectives for a statewide bear population, it should have a requirement for both monitoring and reporting of the trends and vital rates necessary to maintain a stable and healthy population. A long-term commitment to monitoring and reporting is important and should be explicitly documented and required in this Plan.

Pg. 40-41 – *“Grizzly bear distribution and connectivity.”*

COMMENT: There is nothing in this section about monitoring the DNA of all captured and dead bears in both the NCDE and the GYE and areas in between these ecosystems to determine if any reproduction has occurred between NCDE and GYE bears. Specific wording should be added: **“Every captured and dead bear anywhere in Montana will be sampled for DNA to 1) document any possible interbreeding of bears between the NCDE and the GYE; and 2) to document the origins of all bears outside the core areas, particularly in connectivity areas. These DNA results will be publicly reported annually by FWP.”** Such DNA monitoring can document the success of connectivity management efforts, the potential movement of NCDE bears into the GYE, and the possible interbreeding of bears from both ecosystems in the now-isolated GYE. Such DNA monitoring is important and should be explicitly documented here and required in this Plan.

Pg. 41 – *Human safety. “Although FWP would continue to be limited in its ability to alter grizzly bear behavior or the geographic distribution of populations, it would use available discretion to remove or relocate grizzly bears involved in conflicts with humans, particularly in areas where connectivity among population cores is unlikely.”*

² Goble, D. D., J. Weins, J. M. Scott, and T. D. Male. 2012. Conservation reliant species. *Bioscience*. 62:869-873. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1525/bio.2012.62.10.6>.

COMMENT: FWP does in fact have a clear ability to alter bear behavior and a responsibility to do so by reducing human-bear conflicts with efforts to reduce attractants combined with public education and outreach. Conflict prevention and outreach and education efforts are valuable to both humans and bears anywhere grizzly bears may be present—even in areas where connectivity between core areas is unlikely. This section needs to be improved because—as written—it indicates that there will be minimal efforts to prevent conflicts in areas where connectivity is unlikely and that removal of bears after conflicts is preferable to efforts to prevent conflicts.

Pg. 42 – “*Destinations of bears involved in conflicts (captured inside RZs) when moving them is planned.*”

COMMENT: The term “Commission-approved release site” is used four times in this document but there is no explanation of what this term means. We suggest that the criteria used by the Commission to approve or disapprove a release site be explicitly stated. The decision on each site should be documented and the criteria used to accept or reject each site should be explicitly and publicly reported. Since this approval process will have profound impacts on where grizzlies can be relocated and their eventual survival, this process is important. **At a minimum, this definition should explain how and why the Commission approves or rejects release sites, the criteria used by the Commission to reach such decisions, the origins of sites considered for approval or rejection by the Commission, the dates of releases, and how many bears can be relocated at each site.**

Pg. 43 – *Population research and monitoring. “...if it becomes feasible to estimate grizzly bear abundance or trends in any of the Occupied core areas, FWP would prioritize attempts to do that.”*

COMMENT: This sentence should be improved and clarified by adding the term “between.” This sentence should read: “***...if it becomes feasible to estimate grizzly bear abundance or trends BETWEEN any of the Occupied core areas, FWP would prioritize attempts to do that.***” The monitoring of grizzly bear abundance and trajectory (trend) with acceptable accuracy and precision is already feasible with scientifically applied monitoring efforts. The numbers, vital rates, and trajectory of bears in each core area is of critical importance to understanding the health of grizzly bear populations and the success of management programs. The application of discretionary mortality, such as in the event of a hunting season, is dependent upon the accurate understanding of population health including vital rates, trends, and sustainable mortality given the current population estimate. This section needs to be rewritten to require that FWP will apply the best available science to annually monitor population trajectory and the minimum numbers of bears in each occupied core area. In connectivity areas and in all areas surrounding core habitats, annual mortalities should be monitored and reported by sex/age/location, and mortality cause.

Pg. 47 – “*e) If mortality thresholds – as outlined in ... for ARM 12.9.1403 (b)(ii) and (b)(iii) - should be exceeded in any given year, then hunting would not be allowed the next year*”

COMMENT: This page (and all others where ARM 12.9.1403 is referenced) is misquoting the ARM. The sentence should read (and all other pages where ARM 12.9.1403 is referenced) “***e) if mortality thresholds – as outlined in ... for ARM 12.9.1403 (b)(ii) OR (b)(iii) - should be exceeded in any given year, then hunting would not be allowed the next year***”

Pg. 47 – “*Manage mortalities from all sources, including hunting and the loss of grizzly bears by translocation out of the NCDE, to support an estimated probability of at least 90% that the grizzly bear population within the demographic monitoring area remains above 800 bears...*”

COMMENT: This sentence should say: “***Manage mortalities from all sources, including hunting, unknown/unreported calculated mortalities, known and probable mortalities, and any losses of grizzly bears by translocation out of the NCDE, to support an estimated probability of at least 90% that the grizzly bear population within the demographic monitoring area remains***

above 800 bears.” Another sentence should be added that says: **“FWP will manage mortalities within the NCDE to assure that this population is stable to increasing and that there is no decline in numbers or distribution of the NCDE grizzly population.”** There should also be specific direction: **“FWP will monitor and annually report the numbers of all grizzly bear mortalities by sex, age and mortality cause outside the NCDE and GYE DMAs and the Cabinet/Yaak Recovery Area, and especially in all connectivity areas.”** As written, it seems that there is no monitoring or reporting requirement for mortalities and their causes outside the NCDE or GYE. Since almost all bears outside the NCDE originated inside the NCDE DMA and go in and out of the NCDE during various parts of the year, the monitoring and reporting of every grizzly mortality outside the NCDE is important to understand the health and security of the NCDE population. Management of discretionary mortality inside and outside the NCDE area requires knowing the number and causes of all mortalities outside of core areas. Mortality reporting should be applied to the GYE to annually report the numbers and causes of all grizzly mortalities outside the GYE DMA in all 3 states.

Pg. 51 – *“The geographic setting of this plan consists of the thirty counties of Western Montana (Figure 7). Although possible, it is unlikely that counties further east would be affected, so they are not discussed here.”*

COMMENT: This geographic setting discounts what’s already known about bears east of the line defined by these counties. Bears are already present in places such as Choteau, Liberty, Judith Basin and Fergus counties. Those places are very much affected by this Plan and the state should commit to including the needs of those bears and communities in this Plan. Further, it goes against public opinion from the Nesbitt et al. (2020) study, which FWP relies on to support other management decisions and claims in the Draft Plan.³ According to that study (question 27), 42.1% of Montanans find it acceptable or very acceptable for grizzly bears to become established anywhere they make it to on their own. Another 29.1% of Montanans are neutral on this topic. So, 71.2% of Montanans are either supportive or neutral on allowing grizzly bears to become established anywhere they make it to on their own.

Pg. 71-72 - *“Climate change and grizzly bears”*

COMMENT: This section identifies that the full scope of the impacts of climate change on grizzly bear behavior, movement, habitat, forage and denning duration is still being researched. However, it is not clear how new and updated research will impact or change portions of this Plan. There needs to be an acknowledgement that future scenarios for climate change impacts in this region are uncertain, and therefore timely updating of best available science and adaptation of this plan to account for climate impacts will need to occur. Further, the Plan rightly states that climate change and the adaptations that bears will need to make may put them at a greater risk of conflict with humans. We suggest elaborating on what steps will be taken to mitigate that risk. Similarly, the Plan does not recognize the threat of lost or changing habitat—through climate change or human development—on the ability of grizzly bears to continue to adapt. Finally, the Plan does not address the potential for shorter denning periods, therefore putting bears at greater risk of conflict and/or unintended death through exposure to wolf trapping, snaring, and baiting or to the hunting of black bears with hounds.

Pg. 85 – *“FWP interprets these maps as providing optimism that, assuming the continuation of conflict prevention and response programs and the continuation of approximately current levels of human*

³ Nesbitt, H.K., A.L. Metcalf, and E.C. Metcalf. 2020. Human dimensions of grizzly bear management in Montana. Descriptive statistics from a statewide survey of MT residents. Submitted to Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. University of Montana Frank College of Forestry. https://www.cfc.umt.edu/research/humandimensions/files/hd_grizzlybear_report20200323.pdf.

infrastructure, grizzly bear connectivity (at least west of the Continental Divide) can gradually be accomplished—even in the presence of human–bear conflicts, and some resultant deaths of bears.”

COMMENT: This sentence should be adjusted to clearly acknowledge the importance of minimizing discretionary mortality in connectivity areas and the likelihood of increasing levels of human infrastructure in these areas. Montana’s population growth rate is one of the highest in the nation.⁴ This state is rapidly losing its open spaces, and development has accelerated since the COVID pandemic (e.g., refer to data from Headwaters Economics, 2018).⁵ This has major impacts on the ability of grizzly bears to move through the landscape safely. Montana’s 2023 legislature is in session at the time of this comment period, and legislators are considering bills that would allow for increased development on private land by removing minimum zoning acreages and other avenues, in both core and connectivity areas. This could greatly impact bear habitat and connectivity, which further highlights the uncertainty and potential risks of increased human infrastructure in the future. The optimism expressed here can only be realized if there is concerted effort by the state to facilitate bear movement, including by minimizing discretionary mortality from any grizzly bear hunting or bear removals in these connectivity areas. This is particularly important because in peripheral and connectivity areas, grizzly bear numbers and density will be low and any mortalities due to discretionary mortality—other than management removals after serious or repeated conflicts—must be minimized despite the continued pace of change related to humans expanding their footprint.

It is also important to recognize the reality that conflict prevention is necessary beyond human-related attractants and livestock to include the elimination of black bear hound hunting and wolf trapping using snares, traps, and bait. Hound hunting of black bears and wolf trapping with snares, traps, and bait currently occurs inside many of the occupied grizzly bear areas shown in the maps on Pg. 86 and 87, and in the connectivity areas between the GYE and NCDE. These conflict-causing activities exist because of laws passed by the Montana legislature, including those passed into law prior to the release of this draft for public comment and some that may become law at the conclusion of the current legislative session. This is a very serious omission that needs to be added to this Plan. These activities are a new and lethal risk for grizzly bears in Montana that can result in grizzly mortality (e.g. see Servheen, 2022)⁶ and reduced connectivity opportunities in Montana. Efforts to reduce human-bear conflicts must include recognition of all types of conflict sources and management to reduce these conflict sources. If grizzly hunting and/or if black bear hound hunting and wolf trapping using snares, traps, and bait are allowed in connectivity areas, the few grizzly bears in these areas are likely to be reduced or eliminated, as will the probabilities of eventual connectivity between ecosystems. The impact of legislation that results in conflicts with and death of grizzly bears will erode—if not destroy—the adequacy of the mortality management systems implemented by FWP in this Plan. We know that FWP cannot change state laws, but FWP needs to address the impacts of this legislation in this Draft Plan in order to adequately regulate the mortality of grizzly bears in Montana as required for eventual delisting.

Pg. 89 – *“The contributions of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in helping to minimize human–bear conflicts cannot be overstated...”*

COMMENT: We suggest this list be expanded to more fully capture the diversity of NGO and organizational contributions to grizzly bear conflict prevention. Many agencies, NGOs, Tribes,

⁴ See, for example, https://helenair.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/montana-continues-trend-of-high-population-growth/article_c57b10c6-9cbc-5c45-b624-9016a657bc8e.html.

⁵ See Headwaters Economics 2018 article, “Montana Losing Open Space” at <https://headwaterseconomics.org/economic-development/montana-home-construction/>.

⁶ Servheen, C. 2022. Anti-Predator and Anti-Science. The Wildlife Professional. 16:33-37.

and landowners have been working collaboratively for decades to prevent conflicts with grizzly bears and continue to lead initiatives to minimize conflict prevention. For example, NRDC, NPCA, and Heart of the Rockies Initiative are working in partnership with the Locally-led Conflict Reduction Partnership, multiple agencies, landowners, and Tribes to scale up financial and technical support for conflict prevention programs. These efforts are helping to identify needs on the ground, scale up funding, support program delivery and coordinate across diverse entities. Another example is the Missoula Bear Smart Working Group, which has written a Missoula Bear Hazard Assessment and a Human-Bear Conflict Management Plan for Missoula and surrounding areas. This conflict Plan is directed at both grizzly and black bears in the Missoula area, and it has been unanimously adopted by Missoula County Commissioners and the Missoula City Council.

Pg. 96 – “*Moving non-conflict grizzly bears...*”

COMMENT: As previously noted, this Plan needs to explicitly detail how and why relocation sites are approved or disapproved by the Commission and how often such approvals occur and are updated. Also, if it is possible for the Commission to remove a relocation site from approval, this process needs to be specifically detailed. At present, the Commission process related to relocation sites is opaque to the public. Relocation sites are important to grizzly bear management and distribution and to the ability of grizzlies to move into and across connectivity areas. The details of this relocation site approval process need to be added to this Plan.

Pg. 96 – “*Note also that the Occupied range map is deliberately not as inclusive as USFWS’s “may be present” concept (Figure 4).*”

COMMENT: Why is FWP choosing to use a “less inclusive” occupancy or grizzlies-may-be-present process? This choice of a less inclusive mapping system will put the few dispersing grizzlies outside recovery areas and in some parts of connectivity areas at risk. This is particularly important because such occupancy or grizzlies-may-be-present maps should be the basis to prohibit activities that can result in injury or death to grizzly bears. Specifically, such range maps and regular updating of such maps are critically important to prohibiting hound hunting of black bears and wolf trapping using snares, traps and bait in areas where grizzly bears may be present. It is important that grizzly range expansion into new habitats continue. Such dispersal can function to connect ecosystems genetically and demographically.

This Plan (e.g., “*FWP would prioritize conflict prevention activities in the four cores areas and also the in-between areas where low-density populations for improved connectivity may appear feasible.*” Pg.41) stresses the importance of connectivity between ecosystems. However, the 2021 Montana legislature passed laws that directly threaten the survival of grizzly bears in and out of core areas including:

- SB 98 allows anyone to shoot a grizzly bear if it is “threatening” to kill a person or livestock. Threatening is not defined. This law is superseded by federal law as long as grizzly bears are listed under the ESA. However, if the grizzly was delisted, this law would allow anyone to shoot a grizzly bear anywhere for vague and undefined reasons. With this law, FWP could not limit or manage the number and location of grizzly bear killings and therefore FWP would not have adequate regulatory mechanisms in place. Consequently, this law will preclude delisting because it would prevent FWP from managing mortality numbers and bear distribution in Montana.
- HB 224 mandates FWP to allow the use of neck snares to kill wolves. This will result in grizzly bear injury and deaths and the deaths of countless numbers of other non-target animals.
- HB 468 allows the use of hounds to hunt black bears (which had been outlawed in Montana for 100 years). The use of hounds to hunt black bears will result in conflicts and death for grizzly bears in the areas where hounds are used.

- SB 314 allows the use of bait around wolf traps and neck snares. Bait will also attract grizzly bears and other forest carnivores to these sites where they will be trapped or snared and will be killed or maimed.
- HB 225 extends the wolf trapping and neck snaring season into the time that both grizzly and black bears are out of their dens, which will result in bears being caught, maimed, or killed in wolf traps and neck snares.

These laws are a grave risk to grizzly bears, and if implemented where grizzly bears may be present, these laws will preclude the ability for FWP to adequately regulate grizzly mortality as required for delisting.⁷ These laws passed by the 2021 legislature are a strong indication of what will happen to grizzly bears in the event they are delisted in Montana. The executive summary of this Plan states on Pg. 5: *“the plan is designed to guide state management while this species remains so listed—and also to articulate FWP’s future vision for management should any grizzly bear populations in Montana be delisted and full management authority for them be returned to the state.”* In order to assure that the above-listed laws do not result in dead grizzly bears and do not eliminate the possibility of dispersal and connectivity across western Montana, this Plan must specifically state how FWP will protect grizzly bears from the detrimental impact of these laws.

While we recognize that FWP cannot change state laws, it can limit the application of such laws to places where they will not harm grizzly bears. The FWS where-grizzlies-may-be-present maps are the best way to address this critically important issue. This Plan should plainly state that FWP will oppose the application and implementation of laws that will result in unregulated grizzly mortalities in areas identified in the where-grizzlies-may-be-present maps. FWP should adopt the mapping process used by FWS (that was done in cooperation with FWP, Tribal, and federal agencies) to develop where-grizzlies-may-be-present maps in Montana. This where-grizzlies-may-be-present map is more comprehensive and will be more protective of dispersing and connectivity-area grizzlies. Explicit application of this process through this Plan will reduce the risk of unregulated mortality to grizzly bears and will allow FWP to better achieve adequate regulatory mechanisms for grizzly management as required for delisting and core area connectivity as recommended by the Grizzly Bear Advisory Committee, the NCDE Conservation Strategy, and this Plan. The techniques detailed in these laws will lead to unregulated—and in many cases unreported—grizzly bear conflicts and deaths. FWP should voice opposition to the application of these laws in all of western Montana, in both the state legislature and at FWP Commission meetings.

A related concern we have that is not addressed in this Plan is how FWP will regulate wolf trapping using snaring and bait, as well as hound hunting of black bears if the grizzly is delisted. Current FWP regulations limit the distribution and dates of use for wolf traps and snares in areas where ESA-listed grizzly bears and lynx are present. There are currently limitations on hound hunting of black bears in some areas where grizzly bears are present, but some areas where grizzly bears are definitely present are open to hound hunting of black bears, such as many areas between the GYE and NCDE in the High Divide, and areas between the C/Y and the Bitterroot, and between the NCDE and the Bitterroot. The lynx area limitations on wolf trapping and snaring were not a proactive conservation effort by FWP to help lynx but were the result of a lawsuit to limit wolf trapping areas in lynx habitat to protect lynx. The court required FWP to limit use of wolf traps and snares in lynx habitat. **This Plan needs to unambiguously state how FWP plans**

⁷ See letter signed by 35 wildlife professionals at https://missoulian.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-we-cannot-support-delisting-montana-grizzly-bears-unless-state-laws-are-changed/article_b9d33e93-32c1-5022-bc1f-49666ccac4cf.html.

to manage the trapping, snaring and baiting of wolves, as well as black bear hound hunting activities in grizzly habitat if the grizzly is ever delisted. Without these explicit statements, we have no confidence that the state will be able to adequately manage for long-term recovery of grizzly bears post-delisting.

Pg. 98 – “*Translocated individuals would be considered experimental animals, and either moved or euthanized should they cause conflicts with humans.*”

COMMENT: This language is unnecessary and potentially harmful. Any bears moved should be treated as resident bears and managed using the IGBC Guidelines. There is no need for special status (experimental) for these bears. **This sentence should be removed.**

Pg. 98 and 209 – “*For any translocated individuals that survive and remain in the Yellowstone area at least 1 year, the allowable mortality limit for that gender for the GYE (per the Conservation Strategy) would be increased by one (to account for the unanticipated addition of that individual, reinforcing that the augmentation is for genetic, not demographic purposes).*”

COMMENT: This language is counterproductive and should be removed. The purpose of any such translocation is not to increase the grizzly mortality allowance. It is to improve the genetic diversity of the GYE population. The mortality limit is a percentage of the total population so any additional bears could be added to the total population size estimate. The increase in allowable mortality would not change to any measurable degree with the addition of a few bears to the total population. It is important to note that FWS and FWP did not increase the mortality limit in the Cabinet/Yaak ecosystem nor did the public request this when these agencies augmented that population with 20+ bears over many years. **This sentence should be completely removed.**

Pg. 99 – “*Would a grizzly bear hunt be a “trophy” hunt?*”

COMMENT: We suggest FWP be direct and avoid euphemisms in this section. Any grizzly bear hunt would be a trophy hunt. Trophy hunting is hunting animals for sport and is differentiated by the public from hunting animals for meat. Few if any people who kill a grizzly bear would do so for the meat. Even though hunters are not supposed to waste edible meat, we strongly suspect that most hunters would not save and consume grizzly bear meat as meat is a highly unlikely objective of grizzly bear hunting. Another reason that consuming grizzly meat is unlikely is that grizzly bears can carry high loads of *Trichinella* spp., an infectious nematode that can cause severe health risks in humans who eat bear meat. The public—even those who do not hunt—differentiate between hunting animals for meat and hunting animals for sport (trophy hunting). For example, a survey conducted in 2019 assessed the American public’s perspective of trophy hunting, finding only 29% approve of hunting for trophy while 84% approve of hunting for meat. Compared to previous public surveys, these results showed a decrease in support for trophy hunting.⁸ Similar survey results collected in 2022 among 1,000 adults in Canada showed that 81% of Canadians are opposed to trophy hunting, while 62% support hunting animals for meat.⁹ Such strong societal opposition to trophy hunting grizzly bears in British Columbia eventually led the Canadian province to end the practice.

FWP should be clear that grizzly bear hunting in Montana would be trophy hunting. The following sentence in this section is false and misleading: “*In this sense, hunting a grizzly bear would not be different from hunting deer or elk*”. **Sidebar 9 on Pg. 99 should be removed as it is deceptive and incorrect.**

⁸ See 2019 survey results from Responsive Management and the National Shooting Sports Foundation at https://www.fishwildlife.org/application/files/7715/5733/7920/NSSF_2019_Attitudes_Survey_Report.pdf.

⁹ See 2022 survey results from Research Co. at https://researchco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Release_Animals_CAN_08Apr2022.pdf.

Pg. 99-100 –This Plan seems to primarily be concerned with issues of inclusion in terms of people who want to hunt bears feeling “*disenfranchised by a FWP that did not take advantage of a future legal structure that allowed for hunting, considering it to have become an agency they no longer recognize or feel speaks to them;*” and “*providing a place for hunting within the overall management and conservation scheme may, for those whom hunting forms an important part of their identity, foster a sense that the agency is empathetic with those values.*”

COMMENT: Many people value grizzly bears and only a very small minority of Montanans are likely to consider participating if a grizzly hunt is ever offered. The population of Montana has grown and demographics have changed over time. Wildlife watching is an increasingly important recreational activity and there are many Montanans who strongly oppose hunting bears and feel it would conflict with their values, worldview, or even their livelihoods, for those connected to the rapidly growing wildlife tourism industry. **This Plan needs to acknowledge this diversity of perspectives and extend this same concern with issues of inclusion, trust and values to those who do not support a grizzly bear hunt.** Furthermore, this Plan does not acknowledge Tribal views on public grizzly bear hunts. FWP should explicitly state how it will take Tribal views and opinions into account.

Pg. 100 – “*FWP believes this sense of inclusion, particularly among rural landowners who would be asked by Montanans generally to allow grizzly bears to travel through, and sometimes live on their lands, can serve to improve their cooperation...*”

COMMENT: This Plan inappropriately claims that landowners will cooperate with conflict reduction programs if there is a grizzly bear hunt based on a study done in 2012 (Lewis et al, 2012) related to measuring tolerance of wolves. However, wolves and bears are very different species and the demographics of Montana have changed since 2012. This study does nothing to further the argument that hunting bears will increase tolerance and cooperation and FWP needs to acknowledge the lack of veracity of these claims.

Pg. 101-111 – “*A potential grizzly bear hunt: functions, expectations, and regulations.*”

COMMENT: It is important to recognize in this Plan that grizzly bear hunting is not necessary to manage grizzly bears, and will not meaningfully contribute to the management of human-bear conflicts or human safety. This is clear after decades of grizzly management with no hunting in Montana. Other grizzly bear administrators such as those in British Columbia and Alberta have prohibited grizzly bear trophy hunting and deemed it as unnecessary for grizzly management and objectionable to most of society. Even if a hunt inside core areas was managed to assure that the grizzly population remained stable to increasing, the number of bears killed in such a hunt would be very small in some years and none in other years depending on numbers of mortalities from other causes such as conflicts and illegal kills. Thus, the benefits claims made in the Plan seem improbable and should be removed. If a bear hunt ever takes place, we urge a very limited, cautious approach and strongly oppose allowing hunting in any connectivity areas. Allowing hunting in connectivity areas is counterproductive to FWP’s stated goals of establishing connectivity between recovery areas.

Much of this Plan is devoted to justifying a grizzly bear hunt. There is a strong bias in this Plan towards promoting hunting grizzly bears as opposed to promoting ways to coexist and minimize situations that can lead to conflicts with grizzly bears. For example, the words “hunt”, “hunting”, “hunters”, “hunter”, and “grizzly bear hunting” appear a total of 379 times in this Plan; while the words “conflict reduction”, “education”, “outreach”, “coexistence”, “stewardship”, “secure attractants”, and “reduce grizzly conflicts” appear a total of 104 times in this Plan (refer to tables

below). This word distribution evidences unjustifiable weight and attention given to promoting grizzly bear hunting, rather than a fair evaluation and balance against other important management strategies (e.g., conflict prevention, education and outreach, connectivity) in the state’s approach, and this is reflected throughout the Draft Plan. This imbalance is especially troubling because grizzly hunting would involve a very small proportion of hunters and residents of Montana, while conflict prevention efforts would benefit bears and communities across Western Montana. We encourage the state to step away from its emphasis on hunting, recognizing that this management tool is not necessary to managing bears and that the costs will outweigh the benefits.

Hunting-related words used in this plan	# of times	Stewardship-related words used in this plan	# of times
Hunt	67	Conflict reduction	6
Hunting	245	Education	40
Hunters	26	Outreach	37
Hunter	16	Coexistence	14
Grizzly bear hunting	25	Stewardship	2
		Secure attractants	5
Total	379	Total	104

Pg. 101 – *“If hunting occurred, it would be embedded within and consistent with FWP’s overarching goal of maintaining thriving grizzly bear populations within their core areas, under the Preferred Alternative in encouraging connectivity among those areas where doing so is most likely to result in biological benefit and where bear-human conflicts can mostly likely be kept to manageable levels, and maintaining public support for both of those goals.”*

COMMENT: This sentence is vague. If hunting is being considered, FWP should be explicit and transparent about its intentions on the use of grizzly bear hunting in all areas that are not core areas or connectivity areas. There is nothing in this Plan about the distribution of the number of hunting units inside and outside core areas. This is of particular concern in important areas such as along national park boundaries. The wolf hunts of the 21/22 season along the Yellowstone National Park (YNP) boundaries were particularly damaging as they allowed wolf hunters to kill habituated wolves along the YNP boundaries and severely damage the resident wolf population in YNP. This harmful practice could also happen with a grizzly hunt along the Glacier National Park (GNP) and YNP boundaries. **This Plan should include a clear statement that hunting grizzly bears along all GNP and YNP boundaries would be prohibited.**

Pg. 105-106 – *“Would hunting grizzly bears reduce human–bear conflict?”*

COMMENT: This section presents some useful information on the lack of effectiveness of hunting on reducing human-bear conflicts. We suggest adding other references to this section, including Obbard et al. (2014) who found: *“Human-bear conflict was not correlated with prior harvests, providing no evidence that larger harvests reduced subsequent human-bear conflicts. Given that variation in natural foods, harvest is unlikely to prevent elevated levels of human-bear conflicts in years of food shortage unless it maintains bears at low densities – an objective that might conflict with maintaining viable populations and providing opportunities for sport harvest.”*¹⁰ There is no evidence that hunting would reduce human-bear conflicts unless it was so

¹⁰ Obbard, M.E., E.J. Howe, L.L. Wall, B. Allison...M.N. Hall. 2014. Relationships among food availability, harvest, and human–bear conflict at landscape scales in Ontario, Canada. *Ursus* 25(2), 98-110.

intense as to kill almost all the bears in the area. Note that the Governor's Grizzly Bear Advisory Council also agreed: "...*hunting is not likely to be an effective tool for conflict prevention or reduction.*"

Pg. 108 – "*Auction hunt. Hunting units would not be geographically confined to a DMA, but any animals taken would count against the maximum prescribed within that DMA.*"

COMMENT: If the state ever moves forward with a grizzly bear hunt, **we strongly object to allowing hunts of any kind in connectivity areas as this will unnecessarily put the few bears in connectivity areas at risk of death and would diminish the possibility of connectivity.**

Pg. 108 – "*Limited draw, sustainable off-take hunt. The primary anticipated benefit would be an enhanced sense of involvement and engagement among landowners living near the bears subject to this kind of hunt. FWP anticipates that an enhanced sense of landowner engagement that would accompany this type of hunting would help foster communication and cooperation with FWP bear managers and NGO staff working to minimize human/bear conflicts.*"

COMMENT: There is no clear evidence that allowing hunters to kill grizzly bears in the NCDE, which is mostly public lands, would cause private landowners to have an "enhanced sense of involvement and engagement and cooperation with FWP bear managers and NGO staff working to minimize human-bear conflicts". As pointed out before in "Pg. 100" above, FWP is basing this opinion on a 2012 study about tolerance for wolves (Lewis et al). There is no information to support this statement that a limited hunt of grizzly bears would reduce human-bear conflicts and therefore this statement should be removed.

Pg. 109 – "*Auction hunt. Hunting units would not be geographically confined to a DMA, but any animals taken would count against the maximum prescribed within that DMA.*"

COMMENT: We strongly believe that if a hunting season is ever offered, no connectivity areas should be subject to any kind of grizzly bear hunting.

Pg. 109-111 – "'Projected benefits', 'Projected downsides' in all three proposed hunting frameworks"

COMMENT: The costs of a potential hunt would outweigh the benefits, and none of the proposed hunting frameworks are necessary to managing grizzly bears. A grizzly bear hunt would raise limited funds for FWP because there would be few tags offered in any given year if the state is going to adequately regulate mortality. An auctioned special tag to trophy hunt a grizzly bear might raise enough money to pay part of the salary and benefits of one bear biologist or one FWP bear management technician, but the public image "black eye" would be significant. In comparing the costs of grizzly hunting with the supposed benefits of grizzly hunting, it is difficult to clearly see any benefits that outweigh the costs in terms of: 1) damage to the image of Montana and the hunting community; 2) negative public perceptions about killing iconic animals recently recovered by the ESA; 3) trophy hunting iconic animals (e.g., what happened in British Columbia where the grizzly hunt was abolished due to almost universal public opposition to trophy hunting); and 4) potential costs to natural connectivity.

Pg. 109 – "*Auction hunt. Subject to the geographic constraints above, hunting units available to the permittee would allow for considerable choice (but not include areas within, or near, the CYE or BE)*"

COMMENT: Again, if the state moves forward with a hunt, we strongly oppose hunting in connectivity areas between ecosystems. No connectivity areas should be subject to hunting, either auctioned hunt permits or general hunting.

Pg. 110 – “*Auction hunt. Many people object to a hunt that is available only to the highest bidder, a person typically with financial means to bid well above what most can afford. This type of hunt is likely to be considered by most of the public as a ‘trophy hunt,’ which are held in lower regard by many members of the public than hunts available to those of lesser financial means*”.

COMMENT: The public outcry that will occur when FWP sells a trophy grizzly hunt to a wealthy individual so he/she can kill a grizzly bear will be immense. The sale of such a trophy hunt to kill a recently delisted iconic species that was recovered with tens of millions of dollars of public money—only to be killed as a trophy by a wealthy individual—will generate serious pushback for FWP and Montana. We strongly suggest that the idea of such a trophy hunt be rejected by FWP.

Pg. 110 – “*Population growth reduction hunt. Permits would be limited numerically to produce, at maximum, a slow and modest reduction in the underlying rate of growth but would not be constrained by the maximum allowable mortality limits codified in any multi-agency conservation plans.*”

COMMENT: FWP has no measure of the rate of growth of populations outside DMAs where demographic characteristics and vital rates are not monitored, so achieving “*a slow and modest reduction in the underlying rate of growth*” is improbable. We recommend that all known and probable grizzly deaths from all causes and a calculated unknown/unreported number of deaths and hunting mortalities (should there be any hunts) should be reported annually and carefully assessed for their impacts on the number and population trajectory inside DMA areas. We restate our comment on Pg. 47 regarding mortality monitoring and management outside DMAs: **Also, there should be specific direction in this section that FWP will monitor and annually report the numbers and causes of all grizzly bear mortalities outside the NCDE DMA including the connectivity areas between the NCDE and the GYE, the NCDE and the Bitterroot, and the NCDE and the C/Y.** As written, this Plan seems to require no monitoring or reporting for mortalities and their causes outside the NCDE or GYE DMAs. Since almost all bears outside the NCDE DMA originated in the NCDE DMA, or go in and out of the NCDE DMA during various parts of the year, the monitoring and reporting of these outside-the-NCDE DMA mortalities is important to understanding the health and security of the NCDE population and the management of any discretionary mortality inside and outside the NCDE area. These same requirements should also be applied to the GYE to monitor and annually report the numbers and causes of all grizzly bear mortalities outside the GYE.

The literature shows that natural food variation is the most likely driver of human-bear conflicts, and that hunting would have little or no impact on human-bear conflicts. In addition, most conflict bears will have already been promptly relocated or removed by FWP managers when such conflicts occur outside of or even during any hunting seasons leaving the remaining bears to be hunted those that have no history of conflict. There is no evidence that killing non-conflict bears in a hunt would increase the “involvement and engagement and cooperation (of local landowners) with FWP bear managers and NGO staff.”

Pg. 110 – “*Population growth reduction hunt.*”

COMMENT: This section does not specifically prohibit hunters from killing bears in groups as in the auction hunt section. “Groups” almost always refers to females accompanied by cubs or yearlings or 2-year-olds. We are disappointed that FWP proposes to allow females with offspring to be shot by hunters, thereby orphaning young bears and likely leading to their deaths. ***Under “Characteristics” of the population growth reduction hunt a bullet point reading “Taking of a bear in a group would be prohibited” should be added, similar to the auction hunt section.***

Pg. 111 – “*Population growth reduction hunt. A secondary anticipated benefit would be enhanced acceptance among local residents of remaining bears because of the removal of some bears from these landscapes (i.e., areas where bears are not expected to contribute measurably to connectivity or to*

establish new populations). Bear-human conflicts would be anticipated to decline slightly simply from fewer bears being on the landscape.”

COMMENT: As stated previously, there is minimal evidence that hunting bears will result in “enhanced acceptance among local residents of the remaining bears.” One could also assume that hunting would result in dissatisfaction with FWP from some residents opposed to bears unless every bear in the area is killed in a hunt. There is as much evidence for that statement as for the statement of FWP about “enhanced acceptance” as a result of killing non-conflict bears in a hunt. As is noted several times by FWP in this Plan, there is ample evidence that killing bears in a hunt does not reduce conflicts to any measurable degree.

Pg. 201 – *“If the population within the DMA is less than 600, which the Parties do not expect to occur based on their commitments under this MOA and other inter-agency commitments such as those described in the Strategy, discretionary mortality under the Parties’ respective authorities will not occur, except for management removals to address human safety issues.”*

COMMENT: This is an alarming statement. If the DMA population is less than 600 this would be a catastrophic decline of more than 40%. Hopefully long before the population reached this level the agencies would have taken action, including reductions of all forms of discretionary mortality and other measures. This sentence seems to be a holdover from a previous time with the population estimate was much lower. **This sentence should be removed.**

Conclusion

For the reasons described above, we urge FWP to revise this Draft Plan according to our suggestions. In particular, we are disappointed by the state’s devaluing of bears in many places where they exist on the landscape now, and over-emphasis on methods for controlling bears lethally—potentially even bears that are conflict-free—rather than making a deep commitment to positive, proactive strategies that support both people and bears living on the landscape. Grizzly bears are our state animal and a part of what gives Montana its wild character that is valued by Montanans and draws people from far and wide to participate in our tourism industry. FWP is one of the few wildlife agencies remaining in North America today that will have the authority and responsibility of stewarding a recovered grizzly population, and that will be best achieved by collaborating with diverse partners to create a safe landscape for bears to thrive in.

We suggest that FWP reconsider its emphasis on hunting and instead concentrate its investments and energy on monitoring, conflict prevention strategies, management response when conflict occurs, cooperation and coordination with communities, Tribes, NGOs, and other local partners, as well as enhanced outreach and education to maintain the health and safety of Montana’s grizzly bears while serving the state’s residents and visitors. As increasing numbers of people move to Montana, grizzly bear habitat will be developed and subdivided and recreation in grizzly country will accelerate, putting further pressure on bears. As the impacts of climate on bears become more pronounced, the future of grizzlies in Montana will depend on careful stewardship and a broad suite of conflict prevention strategies. Putting FWP’s skills and energies into addressing these issues will better meet the increasing demands of maintaining this grizzly bear population than trophy hunting will. Such an approach would build confidence in FWP by people across Montana and throughout the United States who value grizzlies as a special animal and recognize Montana as one of the few places left where grizzlies can still live in the lower 48 states.

Thank you for considering these comments.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Amy E. McNamara in cursive script, followed by a horizontal line.

Amy McNamara
Northern Rockies Director
Natural Resources Defense Council

Handwritten signature of Betsy Buffington in cursive script, followed by a horizontal line.

Betsy Buffington
Northern Rockies Regional Director
National Parks Conservation Association