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April 27, 2017

To: Karen Taylor-Goodrich
Superintendent, North Cascades National Park Service Complex
National Park Service
810 State Route 20
Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284

Eric Rickerson
State Supervisor, Washington Fish and Wildlife Office
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
510 Desmond Dr. SE, Ste. 102
Lacey, WA 98503

Re: Comments for the North Cascades Ecosystem Draft Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan/Environmental Impact Statement

Dear Ms. Taylor-Goodrich and Mr. Rickerson,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan/Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE). The DEIS prepared by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Park Service (NPS) contains an appropriate range of action alternatives and a thorough analysis of those alternatives.

Defenders of Wildlife (Defenders) is a national non-profit conservation organization with over 1,200,000 members and supporters nationwide, including more than 24,000 members and supporters in Washington state. Defenders is a science-based advocacy organization founded in 1947 focused on conserving and restoring native species and the habitat upon which they depend. Defenders has a long history of contributing to agency-led recovery efforts for grizzly bears throughout the species' current range, focusing heavily on reducing conflict through our coexistence program. Since 1997, we have spent over \$500,000 on more than 250 projects designed to minimize or eliminate conflicts between people and grizzly bears in other recovery zones. Defenders is prepared to implement similar co-existence initiatives in and around the NCE, including sharing the cost of electric fencing projects, bear-resistant garbage storage, range riders, livestock protection dogs, voluntary grazing allotment retirements, community outreach, educational materials and more. We have a history of operating these projects in partnership with local communities and residents as well as county, state, tribal and federal agencies.

Defenders is encouraged that the USFWS and NPS (collectively referred to as "the agencies") are continuing to analyze the restoration and recovery of grizzly bears in the NCE. On behalf of Defenders and our members and supporters, I submit the following comments for your consideration. Our comments are divided into the following three segments:

- I. Defenders' recommended preferred alternative;
- II. Major comments, questions and/or concerns regarding key items in the DEIS; and
- III. Additional comments, suggested additions and/or corrections.

I. Recommended Preferred Alternative

Defenders recommends the agencies select a modified version of Alternative C as the preferred alternative in the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) and the record of decision. Specifically, a combination of actions primarily described under Alternative C with selected elements from Alternative B would best meet the “Need for Action,” provide the greatest environmental benefit while causing minimal adverse impacts.

As noted in the DEIS, grizzly bears in the North Cascades Ecosystem (NCE) have been listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) since 1975 and were found by the USFWS to be warranted for uplisting to endangered status in 2016 (page 1 of the DEIS). Encompassing approximately 9,800 square miles, the NCE has very large expanses of suitable grizzly bear habitat, the overwhelming majority of which (90%) is in public ownership, including over 4,000 square miles of protected, designated wilderness. The main obstacle to grizzly bear recovery in the NCE is the extremely small grizzly population in the recovery zone (page 6). With only four confirmed sightings in the NCE over the last decade, there is an urgent need to augment the population with the release of additional bears from other areas into the NCE.

To address this problem, Defenders believes the “Incremental Restoration” approach identified in Alternative C is the appropriate method for the primary phase of recovery efforts in the NCE. Releasing 5 to 7 bears per year over 5 to 10 years to achieve an initial population of 25 grizzly bears in the NCE, with the specified age and sex criteria for bears to be released, is a sound approach.

Defenders recommends that the agencies modify Alternative C to improve the adaptive management section. Specifically, we recommend the inclusion of a monitoring period for Alternative C that is similar to the two-year monitoring period outlined in Alternative B. As written, Alternative C does not have an explicit timeline for monitoring activities, nor does the DEIS describe what monitoring activities would be employed. Monitoring is a critical component of wildlife and natural resource management, particularly for plans that rely on adaptive management. We encourage the agencies to develop a timeline for monitoring with a description of activities that will (or most likely will) occur during this period.

In addition to developing a monitoring period, we recommend that the agencies set demographic goals in the NCE, and that the agencies have the explicit authority to respond to demographic changes with tools, such as reinitiating augmentation efforts. Should the initial restoration population of 25 bears “stall” and/or fail to meet demographic or occupancy goals, the agencies should have the authority to respond appropriately, which includes releasing additional grizzly bears into the NCE beyond the current limit of 1 male and/or 1 female per year. Currently, the agencies have not stated what the demographic goals are in the NCE, nor what specifically would trigger additional augmentation efforts. We recommend that the agencies develop recovery criteria for the North Cascades population. For example, the recovery criteria in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem (CYE), described in the 1993 recovery plan, are: 1) 6 females with cubs over a running 6-year average inside the recovery zone or within 10 miles of its boundaries, excluding Canada; 2) 18 of 22 Bear Management Units are occupied by females with young from a running 6-year sum of verified sightings and evidence; and 3) known human-caused mortality is not to exceed 4% of the population estimate based on the most recent 3-year sum of females with cubs. Furthermore, human-caused mortality of females should not exceed 1.2% of the population estimate for a given year. These mortality limits cannot be exceeded during any 2 consecutive years for recovery to be achieved. Presently, grizzly bear numbers are so small in the CYE that the goal for mortality is zero human-caused mortalities.

Furthermore, as currently constructed, the adaptive management phase of Alternative C does not provide the agencies with sufficient flexibility to facilitate “management changes, such as those described above, that will best ensure that outcomes are met or re-evaluated” (page 27). As written, Alternative C would likely require the agencies to reinitiate a NEPA analysis should the agencies decide that additional augmentation efforts are needed. We ask that the DEIS be amended to clearly outline a timeline, demographic and augmentation goals and authorized agency actions that may be taken under various scenarios.

Implementation of a modified Alternative C offers the best option for meeting the “Purpose of and Need for Action” while minimizing any adverse impacts. As the DEIS analysis points out, threats to public safety would be “exceedingly small” during the first several decades (page 139) and would remain “minimal” over the entire period of restoration (page 140). Similarly, any disruption to recreational activities in the NCE due to grizzly bear restoration efforts would be minimal. Any trail and/or area closures would be “very temporary, localized, and limited to a few hours to a few days” (page 128). In addition, grizzly bear restoration in the NCE “would result in few if any adverse impacts on agriculture and livestock grazing operations” (page 151).

II. Major Comments, Questions and Concerns

The following comments, questions and concerns are listed below in the order in which they appear in the DEIS.

- A. The DEIS appropriately differentiates between a “restoration target” for the purposes of this NEPA process and a “recovery goal” for purposes of the ESA. (page 5) Elsewhere in the DEIS, however, similar terms such as “restoration goal” and “population goal” (pages 21, 22, 28, 29, plus others) are used almost interchangeably and without consistency. The recovery goal population of 200 grizzly bears is referred to as the “restoration target” occasionally in the DEIS, and the term “population goal” has been used to describe the initial restoration target population of 25 bears (page 29). It is important that clear, consistent terminology be used throughout the document to avoid any confusion or misinterpretation by the public. These terms should also be clearly defined in the glossary.
- B. The sections on “Visitor Use and Recreational Experience” (pages 9, 62-67, 121-131) do a good job of presenting the information on existing uses on federal lands, both NPS and U.S. Forest Service (UFSF), and the potential impacts on recreation from each alternative. Unfortunately, the DEIS does not explicitly address visitor use and recreational experience on the approximately 300,000 acres of public land in the NCE managed by the state of Washington. While the impacts on state-managed lands from any of the alternatives is likely to be minimal (given the low impacts identified for the much larger federal lands base and the location of most state lands on the periphery of the NCE), it is still important that the document include a more detailed discussion of these state-managed lands. Recreational use information for state lands is available from the Washington Department of Natural Resources.
- C. The DEIS states that the topic of environmental justice was considered, but dismissed from further analysis (pages 12-13). Native American people, however, including multiple federally-recognized tribes, clearly qualify as a “minority and low income population” and would be directly impacted by NCE grizzly bear restoration efforts. In the “Purpose of and Need for Action” section of the DEIS, tribal cultural and spiritual values are explicitly identified as an objective of the draft plan (page 4). Elsewhere, the DEIS highlights “Ethnographic Resources,” particularly tribal cultural resources, as a topic for detailed analysis (pages 10, 76-78, 154-159). Defenders recommends the document be revised to explicitly identify and address tribal cultural values as environmental justice issues. Much of this work already exists in the ethnographic sections, but it should be recognized as an environmental justice issue as well.
- D. In the discussion of Alternative C, the DEIS most frequently refers to “a goal of establishing an initial population of 25 grizzly bears” in the NCE. (pages 28, 92, plus elsewhere) However, the DEIS also has at least two instances where the initial population under Alternative C would be “**up to** 25 grizzly bears” [emphasis added] (page 28). While subtle, this difference in language is significant and potentially problematic. The addition of this qualifier clause introduces the potential for significantly fewer than 25 bears being released in the first 5 to 10 years. This language is counter to what has been stated by the agencies as the intent of Alternative C and creates unnecessary and inappropriate uncertainty. Defenders strongly recommends the “up to” clause be eliminated from all descriptions of the initial restoration target population in Alternative C.

- E. In the discussion of Alternative D, the DEIS describes a less restrictive criterion of age and sex ratios for grizzly bears augmented into the NCE. This includes bears up to 10 years old and as many as 1 male for every 2 females (pages 29, 94, plus elsewhere). Defenders is concerned with any such proposal, as it could result in a lower population growth rate (page 95). Defenders recommends that whatever preferred alternative is selected in the FEIS, the agencies should avoid using this less restrictive demographic criteria.

- F. In the discussion of potential impacts from helicopter and other human disturbances for each of the three action alternatives (B, C and D), the DEIS describes how various bird species may respond to noise, visual cues, downwash and other aircraft related disturbances (pages 104-105, 107-110). While these sections reference waterfowl, water birds, and raptors such as golden eagles and bald eagles, they fail to note the potential impacts on the two federal ESA listed bird species: northern spotted owl and marbled murrelet. These sections should be revised to include an analysis of the specific mitigation and best management practices that would be implemented to reduce the potential impacts to these two threatened species. Defenders supports the agencies' stated protocols with regards to helicopter use (page 25), and we believe these measures would result in minimal impacts to either northern spotted owls or marbled murrelets.

- G. The section regarding environmental consequences on "Visitor Use and Recreational Experience" (pages 121-131) includes a discussion of attitudes and reactions of visitors to the potential restoration of grizzly bears in the NCE. The DEIS notes that some visitors would view restoration as beneficial to their experience, while other visitors would view it as adversely impacting their experience. However, the DEIS does not quantify these public attitudes regarding NCE grizzly bear restoration efforts.

A poll¹ conducted by Tulchin Research in May 2016 for Defenders of Wildlife found that 80 percent of registered voters in Washington support efforts to help the declining population of grizzly bears in the North Cascades. This overwhelming support extended across gender, generational, regional, and partisan lines; 89 percent of Democrats, 70 percent of Republicans, and 74 percent of independent voters supported restoration efforts. The poll found that Washington voters hold the grizzly bear in high esteem, with 91 percent agreeing with the statement that "grizzly bears are a vital part of America's wilderness and natural heritage." Additionally, 81 percent of respondents believe that "the State of Washington should make every effort to help grizzly bears recover and prevent their disappearance," and 85 percent of voters agree that "efforts to help the North Cascades grizzly bear population to recover should be science-based and led by expert biologists." Defenders recommends the "Visitor Use and Recreational Experience" section be revised to reflect this data regarding public attitudes on grizzly bear restoration efforts in the NCE.

- H. The sections regarding "Public Safety Impacts Associated with Restoration Activities" (pages 67-69, 134-144) note various proactive measures currently being implemented by NPS and USFS to reduce potential conflicts between humans and bears (either grizzly bears or black bears) and the potential for additional measures in the future. These include public education and outreach efforts as well as use of bear-resistant trash receptacles, food storage lockers, loans of portable food storage canisters, electric fencing etc. in the NCE.

As opportunistic omnivores, grizzly bears are frequently enticed by anthropogenic attractants like unattended coolers, garbage and livestock. This situation rarely ends well for the bear and can lead to habituation to human activity, which often becomes a human safety issue. Unfortunately, the only food storage order in the NCE is in the North Cascades National Park complex. Neither Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie nor Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests have food storage orders in place. Both forests should adopt and implement a food storage order similar to the one used in North Cascades National Park² to ensure consistency across the NCE. Enacting and enforcing food storage orders will allow the agencies to proactively minimize human-bear conflicts, improving safety for both people and bears. Funding for enforcement personnel will be important to program success. Included with any food storage order should be a strategy for outreach to the public. The

¹ This was a live telephone survey of 600 registered voters statewide with a margin of error of +/- 4%

² Food storage order available at: http://igbconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/151007_North_Cascades_NP_2013.pdf

Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee and Wildlife Management Institute have developed a public, user-friendly, interactive map identifying food storage orders in and around the six grizzly bear recovery zones.³ Should Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie and/or Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest adopt a food storage order, the forests should include them on this map.

To further reduce the likelihood of conflicts in the NCE, Defenders encourages NPS and USFS to consider requiring backcountry recreationalists to carry bear spray when recreating in the NCE during the non-denning season. As noted in the DEIS, grizzly bear conflict in Yellowstone is much more common in the backcountry than the frontcountry. From 1980 to 2014, 33 of the 45 injuries (roughly 73%) caused by grizzly bears occurred in the backcountry (page 136), highlighting the importance of recreationalists taking extra precautions before going into the backcountry. The agencies could institute a bear spray rental program, similar to rental programs for bear canisters used for food storage.

It is important to note the related and supporting efforts by non-governmental organizations, including Defenders, to provide both community outreach and on-the-ground conflict reduction tools to residents and visitors to the NCE. Defenders has been heavily invested in efforts to minimize conflicts between people and grizzly bears by securing human related attractants such as garbage and livestock. This has included cost-sharing agreements with state, federal and tribal agencies for bear-resistant garbage containment and food storage lockers. Defenders will continue to invest in efforts to secure attractants on public lands.

- I. In the “Public Safety Impacts Associated with Restoration Activities” discussion under Alternative C (page 139), the DEIS states that there are several public awareness and education programs currently in place on federal land. These programs are expected to continue and expand with grizzly bear restoration. Defenders supports efforts to educate the public about how to safely recreate in bear country, and we are encouraged by plans for the agencies to coordinate with each other and non-agency partners (like Defenders) on outreach and education programs. However, we recommend that the agencies develop a clear outreach and education plan that can be implemented under any alternative selected. When developing this plan, we encourage the agencies to collaborate with non-profit organizations, such as Defenders, that have been actively promoting education and bear awareness in the NCE. These outreach activities should include proactive and interactive strategies that will fully engage the public. Signs regarding bear activity and website pages are important components of this strategy, but Defenders believes that the agencies should also explore social media, community presentations and other opportunities. An effective strategy that was used in the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem by USFWS biologist Wayne Kasworm was engaging local schools and students about grizzly bear biology and bear awareness. A similar strategy could aid the NCE restoration effort. Defenders also encourages the agencies to initially focus outreach efforts in the communities that are likely to be the most impacted by grizzly bear restoration, such as Concrete, Darrington, Marblemount, and Mazama.
- J. In the “Socioeconomics” section of the Environmental Consequences chapter (pages 144-153), there is discussion of the potential economic impacts from grizzly bear restoration on agriculture and livestock grazing in the NCE. The DEIS specifically notes that “ranchers could be compensated for cattle and sheep killed as the result of a grizzly bear depredation, if funds are available” (page 147). The state of Washington has an authorized compensation program for livestock damages caused by wild bears.⁴ While subject to the biennial appropriations process of the state legislature, this program can serve as a valuable tool to further minimize any adverse economic impacts caused by grizzly bears to livestock operators. In addition, the state of Washington also has a program for “assisting landowners with minimizing big game damage to private property.”⁵ This program, which includes grizzly bears, is another tool that can assist farmers, ranchers and other private property owners avoid conflicts with grizzly bears. Defenders recommends that the “Socioeconomics” section be revised to incorporate information regarding these two state programs. In

³ Interactive map available at: <http://igbconline.org/food-storage-regulations-2/>

⁴ See Washington Administrative Code W.A.C. 232-36-200

⁵ See Washington Administrative Code W.A.C. 232-36-090

addition, the “State of Washington Laws and Regulations” section in Appendix C should also be revised to include the W.A.C. for these two relevant state programs.

III. Additional comments, suggested additions or corrections

The following comments, suggested additions and corrections are listed below in the order in which they appear in the DEIS.

Page 4, 3rd full paragraph

In describing the land management patterns in the NCE, it would be valuable to clarify that 5 percent of the NCE is made up of state-**managed** lands [emphasis added]. This one-word distinction is important in that many of the lands managed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources are held in trust for local counties (as opposed to owned outright by the state). The same issue occurs on page 39, 2nd paragraph.

Page 5, 1st paragraph

In describing characteristics of remaining, currently occupied grizzly bear habitat, it would be useful to note that these areas are also distinguished by the low density of human activity.

Page 12, 1st paragraph

In discussing potential ground disturbance issues, the DEIS does not reference the impact of grizzly bear rooting behavior on soils. In Glacier National Park, researchers found that by digging for bulbs and roots, grizzly bears can influence the structure of plant communities in subalpine meadows. Sites where grizzly bears dig have higher levels of soil nitrogen, which is often an essential and limiting element for several plant species.⁶ This behavior was also mentioned by USFWS biologist Wayne Kasworm at the February 24th public meeting in Renton as a key, long-term ecological benefit grizzly bears could provide in the NCE. The agencies should address this issue and reassess the potential impacts on soil resources from grizzly bear restoration activities.

Page 26, 1st full paragraph

In describing the frequency of the NPS and the USFWS providing public updates on initial restoration activities, the agencies suggest a maximum number of updates occurring “as often as every week.” Defenders recommends that the agencies also commit to a specified minimum frequency, such as “monthly.”

Page 27, 3rd paragraph

In describing adaptive management, Defenders recommends changing the statement “...knowledge about natural resource systems is sometimes uncertain” to “...knowledge about natural resource systems is **sometimes often** uncertain.” This change better reflects limited human understanding of natural systems and therefore the importance of using adaptive management.

Page 37, 1st full paragraph

The last sentence of this paragraph states that “Alternative B would allow residents of the NCE to become more comfortable living with grizzly bears again, with full restoration likely taking more than six decades depending on results of monitoring information and subsequent decisions.” This sentence should be amended

⁶ See Tardiff, Sandra E. and Stanford, Jack Arthur, "Grizzly Bear Digging: Effects on Subalpine Meadow Plants in Relation to Mineral Nitrogen Availability" (1998). Biological Sciences Faculty Publications. 315. http://scholarworks.umt.edu/biosci_pubs/315

to state that “Alternative B **and Alternative C**...” because both alternatives are expected to take 60 to 100 years to achieve the recovery population goal.

Page 44, first full paragraph

In its discussion of carrying capacity in the NCE, the DEIS cites a recent report by Lyons et al., 2016. This report estimates that the NCE could support a population of 250 to 300 grizzly bears. This report has not been peer reviewed nor published in a scientific journal. When drafting the FEIS, the agencies should only utilize peer reviewed and published research when estimating carrying capacity.

Page 49, final paragraph

In the discussion of the ESA listing status for gray wolves, the document should be revised to explicitly note that wolves in the entire NCE are listed as a threatened species under both federal and state ESA laws.

Page 50, 2nd paragraph

In the discussion of natural predators of coyotes, the document should be revised to specifically state that both black bears and grizzly bears are natural predators of coyotes. The list of coyotes’ natural predators should also include wolves.

Page 76, 1st paragraph

In the discussion of the range of timber harvest, it would be helpful to the public if the agencies describe how the volume (stated in board feet) translates to an approximate number of acres logged.

Page 90, final paragraph

In the final sentence of this paragraph, the DEIS states, when discussing Alternative B, “that the survival rate under this alternative would be at the higher end of the given range (2% - 4%).” This appears to be a misstatement. Are only 2% - 4% of grizzly bears released into the NCE in a given year expected to survive? It seems that the percentage range cited in this sentence is actually the anticipated population growth rate of bears under this alternative. This range is cited as the anticipated growth rate for both Alternative C (page 92) and Alternative D (page 94).

Page 102, 3rd paragraph

In the discussion of interspecific competition under Alternative B, the DEIS states that competition between grizzly bears and gray wolves would be unlikely. This is contradicted by a statement earlier in the DEIS regarding gray wolves, which noted that “Interspecific competition with grizzly bears has been documented typically associated with prey (i.e. carrion), although wolves have been documented preying on grizzly bear cubs in Yellowstone National Park” (page 50). Although this likely does not alter the conclusion that no consequential, adverse impacts are expected, the document should none-the-less be revised to note the potential for such interactions. The same issue occurs in the discussion of Alternative C (page 107, 1st paragraph) and Alternative D (page 109, 1st full paragraph).

Pages 135, first full paragraph

In the discussion about “Grizzly Bear Release Impacts” under Alternative B, the DEIS specifically lists the communities of Concrete, Darrington, Marblemount, and Mazama as communities that are more likely to experience conflicts with grizzly bears given their proximity to the NCE. These communities are not listed under the same discussion for Alternative C (page 139). Defenders suggests that they be specifically mentioned in this section as well.

The index included in the DEIS is of minimal value. Numerous key terms and topics central to the environmental analysis are not included (e.g. growth rate, survival rate, mortality rate) in the index. For some of the terms included in the index, the referenced pages do not appear to actually include any discussion of the topic (e.g. Preferred Alternative, Demographics). Defenders recommends that the index be substantially revised and corrected in order to assist the reader in locating key terms and topics.

IV. Conclusion

Defenders appreciates the countless hours of research that have gone into studying and understanding the NCE grizzly bear population and potential opportunities to restore this population through augmentation. For many, grizzly bears are one of the most beloved animals in the West, and the vast majority of Washingtonians support actions that would restore this Pacific Northwest icon.

As the agencies continue the process of restoring grizzly bears in the NCE, Defenders recommends the adoption of a modified Alternative C in the FEIS. Defenders supports the overall goals and approach outlined in Alternative C, and our recommended modifications are intended to increase the adaptive management components of this alternative, providing the agencies with greater flexibility to respond to on-the-ground changes in population dynamics. Defenders also strongly encourages the agencies to commit to a robust education and outreach strategy to reduce the likelihood of conflict between grizzly bears and humans living and recreating in the NCE.

We look forward to the future of grizzly bear recovery in the NCE. Defenders will continue to promote tolerance and minimize human-related grizzly bear mortalities though our coexistence and educational programs. Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,



Shawn Cantrell
Northwest Program Director
Defenders of Wildlife