



Bitterroot Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan EIS

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Quarterly Update—Fall 2024

Website: <https://www.fws.gov/BitterrootEIS>

In January 2024, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) initiated the development of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) for the restoration of grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem of Idaho and western Montana.

The following entities are cooperating agencies assisting the FWS in the preparation of the EIS:

- U.S. Forest Service
- Idaho Department of Fish and Game
- Idaho Office of Species Conservation
- Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
- Nez Perce Tribe
- Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe
- Coeur d'Alene Tribe
- Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs
- Custer County, ID
- Mineral County, MT
- Ravalli County, MT
- Missoula County, MT
- Sanders County, MT

Purpose and Need and Alternatives

Based on public comments and cooperating agency input, FWS has adjusted its purpose and need for the Bitterroot Grizzly Bear EIS. Minor changes to the statements refocus on the near-term timeframe of the proposed action. This will result in a more focused analysis of impacts of the alternatives giving the public clearer differences between the alternatives to allow for better input at the draft EIS stage. The revised statement is as follows:

Purpose: The purpose of the action is to contribute to the resiliency of grizzly bears in the lower-48 States range-wide by (1) encouraging repopulation of grizzly bears in the Bitterroot Ecosystem to help ensure long-term survival and contributing to overall grizzly bear recovery through redundancy in multiple populations and representation in a variety of habitats; and (2) fostering social acceptance of grizzly bears on the landscape.

Need: This action is needed to comply with the April 26, 2023, order in *AWR et al. v. Cooley et al.*, No. 9:21-cv-00136-DWM (D. Mont.). This action is also needed because grizzly bears in the BE, one of six ecosystems identified for the recovery of the grizzly bear in the lower-48 States (FWS 1993), are functionally extirpated. Although we previously decided to reintroduce grizzly bears into the BE (FWS 2000b), we have not implemented that decision. Since designating the non-essential population in 2000, we have observed individual bears from other ecosystems dispersing through the BE and adjacent areas with greater regularity, particularly in the past several years. We now anticipate that a population of grizzly bears (defined as two or more breeding females or one female with two consecutive litters) may become established in the BE through natural recolonization in the next 15 to 30 years.

Based on this purpose and need, public comments, cooperating agency input, and the limits of FWS authority, FWS has identified and will analyze the effects of following alternatives:

- No Action Alternative - As required by NEPA

- Proposed Action - Natural recolonization with FWS actions to provide education and conflict reduction.
- Alternative A - Reintroduction with introduced grizzly bears managed as a 10j non-essential experimental population.
- Alternative B - Reintroduction with introduced grizzly bears managed as threatened.

FWS is preparing the draft Purpose and Need and Alternatives Chapters, Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, of the EIS after receiving cooperating agency input earlier this summer. FWS is also preparing other aspects of the draft EIS such as the Affected Environment (i.e., existing conditions) and Environmental Consequences Chapter (i.e., Chapter 3), which will describe current resource conditions, issues to be analyzed in the EIS, and the expected impacts of the alternatives to those resources.

Next Steps

The FWS will continue development of the draft EIS this fall and winter. We plan to release the draft EIS for public comment in Summer 2025. We will host public meetings and information sessions to gather more input at that time. We will continue to provide quarterly progress updates.

