

Call for Action by Premier on Endangered Grizzlies – An Indicator of Alberta’s Failing Environmental Health

Calgary: In light of the province’s release of a map of “draft” grizzly bear conservation areas and breaking news that the responsible department has no intention to recover a grizzly bear population now in crisis, Action Grizzly Bear is calling on Alberta Premier Ed Stelmach to require immediate action by Ted Morton, Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Action Grizzly Bear is a collaborative campaign of Sierra Club Canada, Defenders of Wildlife, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, Alberta Wilderness Association, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society, Natural Resources Defense Council and the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative.

“We’re calling on Alberta’s Premier, Ed Stelmach to require Minister Morton to immediately implement an Alberta equivalent to strategies successfully used for progress on recovery in the U.S: 1) listing as endangered under the Alberta Wildlife Act, 2) reinstatement of the science-based recovery team, 3) dedicated funding for recovery, and 4) legislated habitat protection through more land in parks and reduced density of roads, seismic lines and other linear disturbances,” says Carl Morrison with Action Grizzly Bear. “Plus, we’re asking that BearSmart and other similar programs to reduce human caused bear deaths be fully staffed and funded.”

“Premier Stelmach in his Throne Speech said his government had a vision of a healthy natural environment to bequeath to future generations,” emphasises Dianne Pachal of Sierra Club Canada. “Grizzlies are the most publicly and scientifically recognized indicator of health. On-the-ground recovery action is long over due.”

Provincial officials first reported concern over low numbers of grizzly bears and the need for habitat protection in 1984, when it was estimated that there were 500 to 1,000 remaining on provincial lands. Today’s estimate is 330. When Banff and Jasper National Park numbers are included, it is an estimated 490 in all – below the internationally recognized level at which they should be declared endangered. In 2002, when numbers were estimated as 800 to 1,000, the government appointed Endangered Species Conservation Committee asked the Minister to legislate them as threatened. They’ve yet to be legislated as threatened or endangered; leaving action on recovery as totally discretionary, and according to the latest news, there’s no recovery action panned.

In June, Minister Ted Morton dismissed Alberta’s Grizzly Bear Recovery Team, only eight months after accepting most of its proposed recovery plan. The plan envisioned an ongoing role for the Team through 2013, to ensure implementation and progress reporting. The \$2.8 million requested for recovery has yet to be committed by the government.

The map of draft grizzly bear conservation areas is a product of extensive DNA-based studies done by the public-private Foothills Research Institute and reviews by SRD. They add more clarity to the previously understood locations of critical habitat. However, with no government commitment to undertake systematic road closures and expansion or establishment of new parks to secure remaining habitat, the maps are simply more information in the pile documenting the downward slide of the great bears towards extinction in Alberta. Looking to the US for more bears to move in won't help.

"We do know that bears move across borders, but there is no evidence to suggest Montana grizzly bears are a significant source population for grizzly bears in Alberta," states Gordon Stenhouse, Program Lead and Wildlife Carnivore Biologist, Grizzly Bear Program, Foothills Research Institute.

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Background

Headed for Extinction in Alberta

1984, Status of the Fish and Wildlife Resource in Alberta October, 2008

Population Numbers: *"The current estimate in Alberta **outside** the national parks is 500 – 1000 animals."* Current estimate is 330 grizzly bears **outside** Banff & Jasper National Parks.

Goal: *"The long-range goal is to retain a minimum of 1,000 bears, including those in national parks and that seasonally inhabit Alberta. The habitat goal is to maintain the 106,000 sq. km. of grizzly bear range with emphasis on protecting key habitats."* Current estimate is 490 grizzly bears for all of Alberta including national parks. Predictions are that without major action to protect key habitats, grizzly bear range will shrink westward to near the British Columbian-Alberta border.

Key Steps Needed: *"The key to achieving this goal is to retain sufficient wilderness habitat."*

Additional wilderness habitat protected by legislation: six Wildland Parks and Provincial Parks, plus the Kananaskis Country parks totaling under 5,480 km² or somewhat greater than a large home range for a single male grizzly. No habitat outside parks has had road densities decreased (closed or reclaimed to pre-road state) to below the threshold for sustaining grizzly bears.

Fundamentals for Recovery

Fundamental Done? Status. Listing as Threatened or Endangered under Alberta law. Without listing, no legal obligation to act. Without strengthening the Alberta Wildlife Act, no legal obligation to protect habitat. No Listing recommended in 2002 by the government appointed, multi-stakeholder Endangered Species Conservation Committee, based on their scientific sub-committee recommendation for listing as threatened. Lower population number today and context

of ongoing increase in human use & development within grizzly bear range compels listing as endangered.

Dedicated, multi-year budget for recovery. No line in provincial budget for recovery. Budget is completely discretionary within the Sustainable Resource Department. Recovery team (now disbanded) recommended \$2.8 million over initial three years.

Science-based recovery team. No Recovery Team was disbanded by the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development June 2008, prior to completion of mandate. As grizzly bears are still not listed as threatened or endangered in the Alberta Wildlife Act, there is no obligation on the Minister to have a functioning and resourced recovery team.

Habitat protection. Designated protected areas including parks. Mandated program of road closures and reclamation of roads to pre-road state. No Province has yet to act on establishing parks and other such protected areas for prime habitat. This was already recommended by other review or hearing processes, e.g. Cardinal River Headwaters (1996) and Castle-Carbondale (1974, 1996). Department responsible for legislated protected areas & parks have no mandate to initiate designations. No road closure program in place to decrease road densities to below the threshold beyond which grizzly bear numbers are no longer viable. (e.g. over 1,000 miles closed in N. Continental Divide, US)

Reduce Human-Caused Mortality Close hunting season. Reduce conflicts in settled areas. So far Started Current moratorium on hunting. Unknown if will be continued for entire grizzly bear range in 2009. BearSmart Program underway, but ill-defined and under-funded.

Alberta's grizzly bear range (276 404km²) has estimated 490 grizzly bears

Northern Divide Ecosystem (31 564km²) has estimated 765 grizzly bears

Yellowstone National Park (8 987km²) has estimated 600 grizzly bears

Draft Habitat Maps at:

http://www.srd.alberta.ca/fishwildlife/wildlifeinalberta/grizzlybearmanagement/pdf/csa_080924_draft-2.pdf