

Biologist predicts grizzly bears' removal from endangered list

By CHRIS PETERSON / *Hungry Horse News*

The lead biologist in the recovery of grizzly bears said he expects the bears in the greater Glacier National Park area will come off the Endangered Species List within five to six years.

The bears were listed as threatened south of Canada in 1975, but over the past 30 years, the bears have slowly, but steadily, expanded their presence in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem — a swath of land that runs along the continental divide from Canada south to Lincoln and includes all of Glacier National Park.

The current estimate is that there are more than 750 bears in the NCDE and Chris Servheen, the grizzly bear recover coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said he expects the bears will eventually be de-listed.

But that doesn't mean grizzly bear managers will turn back the clock, he cautioned. Far from it. Bear managers will begin work on a broad conservation strategy for bears, a document that "institutionalizes the guidelines that got the grizzly bear where it is today," Servheen said.

That includes everything from managing road densities in national forests to habitat conservation of the Rocky Mountain Front and garbage regulations in campgrounds and towns near prime grizzly habitat.

"Recovery doesn't mean we're walking away," Servheen noted.

But eventually, just like gray wolves, management of grizzlies would be primarily a role for the state.

That conservation strategy was the topic of a series of meetings last week in Missoula held by the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee, a quasi-governmental agency formed in 1983 to conserve grizzlies.

The committee is made up of representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Geological Survey and representatives of the state wildlife agencies of Idaho, Montana, Washington and Wyoming as well as Canada.

The committee will revise the grizzly bear recovery plan for the next three years with a plan completed by the end of 2012, Servheen said.

Over the years, a host of attitudes and strategies have changed in grizzly country. For example, hikers now routinely carry bear spray — a non-lethal spray that is an irritant to bears, but doesn't kill them. Bear spray has been effectively used in dozens of documented bear encounters.

In addition, educational outreach has more and more people using sound methods to secure garbage and other food attractants, both in the front country and the backcountry. Many campgrounds now have bear-proof food storage containers, and bear - resistant garbage receptacles are also used in many places. Bears that get into human foods usually end up dead when they look for another hand-out.

More open spaces are also being protected, either through conservation easements or through government programs. Hundreds of thousands of acres of Plum Creek lands in the Swan Valley, for example, were recently protected from subdivision and will eventually be transferred to the Forest Service through a deal with the Nature Conservancy that uses a blend of private money and government funds.