



THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON

MAR 06 2020

The Honorable Steve Daines
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Daines:

During my hearing before the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on March 4, 2020, we discussed our shared concerns over grizzly bear management in the State of Montana. You have been a vocal leader on this issue, and I would like provide an update on actions the Department of the Interior (Department) is taking to improve the management of grizzly bears. On October 5, 2019, I attended a public meeting in Choteau, Montana at the request of Congressman Greg Gianforte, where we listened to ranchers and other members of the local community discuss the problems they have experienced as a result of the increasing grizzly bear population along the Rocky Mountain Front. During this meeting, I heard about bears breaking into grain silos, denning in crops, and passing through school grounds. The people I met were unsettled by these interactions and felt their concerns were not being heard by the Department and the State of Montana (State). A successful endangered species program is predicated on the support of local communities; species recovery must be collaborative.

As a result of that meeting, I requested the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to convene a meeting among representatives from the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; the Wyoming Game and Fish Department; and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, as well as relevant Tribes and other Federal agencies, to discuss the challenges presented by the recovered and growing Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone grizzly bear populations still subject to listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This meeting between the States and FWS occurred in Helena, Montana on November 26, 2019, and has led to subsequent and ongoing meetings.

These meetings led me to believe it is appropriate to modify how the Department and State manage grizzly bears. Grizzly bear management is a complex framework that is composed of numerous regulations and policies, funding mechanisms, and administrative decisions. This complexity has led to risk-averse and delayed actions when human-bear conflicts arise. Flawed decision-making processes have resulted in growing discontent among the people that live with these bears. The Department has contributed to this sentiment by not clearly defining its obligations under the ESA to manage threatened and endangered species. Under my new direction, FWS will play a more conclusive role when deciding how to handle problem bears and will enter into a contract with the Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services (Wildlife Services) to help implement those decisions.

In addition to funding the Department will provide through the Wildlife Services contract, it is also crucial to fully utilize existing Federal programs to help manage grizzly bears. Through the implementation of the Pittman-Robertson Act, FWS annually provides grants to your State for projects to restore, conserve, and manage animals and their habitat. Last year, the State received more than \$15 million. The FWS uses a purpose-based approach to determine which proposed predator-control actions or projects are eligible for wildlife restoration funding. If the purpose of the proposed project or action meets the criteria for a wildlife restoration project, as defined at 16 U.S.C. 669a(9), and is supported by the primary activities in 50 CFR 80.50, the activities would be eligible. Projects have included, and may include, removal or control of predatory, nuisance, or depredating animals such as grizzly bears. I encourage your State to consider these facts when prioritizing the expenditure of these funds.

Lastly, FWS will be updating and reissuing guidance on actions the public can take to haze grizzly bears that may pose a threat to human safety. These actions include the use of paintballs, noise-making projectiles, and visual deterrents. The new guidance should delineate allowable actions that haze from unallowable actions that harass.

Recovery of the grizzly bear in the lower 48 States is an amazing success story. I look forward to the day when these populations are fully under State management. Until such time, I am hopeful that the actions outlined in this letter will minimize human-bear conflict and begin to rebuild trust with the local community. Continued progress will require FWS and the State to work closely to address the management of growing grizzly bear populations encroaching upon your constituents. I am confident we will meet this challenge. I have sent a similar letter to Representative Greg Gianforte.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be "C. Michael DeWine", written in a cursive style.

Secretary of the Interior