



EMBARGOED UNTIL 5:00 AM, January 11, 2006

Secrecy Surrounds Alberta's Spring Grizzly Bear Hunt Decision

Important information supporting the suspension of Alberta's spring grizzly bear hunt is being kept from the public. With a decision on the hunt due at the end of the month, conservation groups are concerned that the government will allow the hunt to proceed again this year.

One of the documents being kept from the public is the draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan. The plan, which recommends the suspension of the hunt, is still under review and has yet to be accepted and released despite being in the government's hands for over a year.

But there is more critical information being withheld according to Dr. Tracey Henderson, program director with the Grizzly Bear Alliance. "The government now has very accurate DNA-based, grizzly bear population estimates for large areas of the province, which they are refusing to release publicly," says Dr. Henderson. Her group and the Jasper Environmental Association have both tried unsuccessfully, via the provincial Freedom of Information Act, to access the data. They have also been denied access to total grizzly bear mortality numbers for 2005, information that has always been readily accessible in the past.

The government's DNA-based population studies covered the area between highways 1 and 16 and carried a provincial tax dollar price tag of three quarters of a million dollars.

Conservationists allege that if these population estimates were higher than expected, that good news story would have been released right away. But the fact that the data, some of which have been complete for almost a year, have been withheld from the public, strongly suggests population numbers are lower than previously thought.

Prior to these latest secret population estimates, a government commissioned study released in 2003 estimated the population of grizzly bears on provincial lands to be just over 500 (which meant about 700 grizzlies total in the province adding those found in Alberta's National Parks.) An error was found in that study, the model was re-run in early 2005, but the government has also refused to release this information to the public.

"They don't want the public to know what a sorry state our grizzly bear population is in" says Jim Pissot with Defenders of Wildlife Canada. "As long as they keep things quiet, they can continue to allow the spring hunt and encourage the ongoing destruction of grizzly bear habitat in the name of short term economic gain."

In 2002 the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) recommended the grizzly be listed as threatened and the hunt suspended. Since that time the province's own Grizzly Bear Recovery Team and thousands of Albertans have repeatedly asked for the suspension of the hunt and listing the species, while the government has repeatedly pointed to the inaccurate population estimates as a reason for inaction.

"We have better population data than ever before," says Nigel Douglas Conservation Specialist with Alberta Wilderness Association. "It's time to release it to the public and get serious about recovering the species. We need to suspend the hunt, list the grizzly bear as a threatened species, stop the ongoing destruction of grizzly bear habitat and implement the draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan in its entirety."

Tracey Henderson, Grizzly Bear Alliance, 403.678-8532
Jim Pissot, Defenders of Wildlife Canada, 403.678-0016
Nigel Douglas, Alberta Wilderness Association 403.283-2025
Jill Seaton, Jasper Environmental Association 780.852-4152

Alberta Grizzly Bear Backgrounder

Information Alberta Government refuses to release:

1. DNA-based population studies

- DNA-based population studies are the most scientifically accurate method currently in existence for estimating population size for bears distributed over large areas
- First phase of provincial study was conducted for grizzly bear habitat between highways 11 and 16 and cost 350 000 tax dollars . The results and report were finished in early 2005.
- Second phase of provincial study was conducted in grizzly habitat between highways 1 and 11 at a cost of 400 000 tax dollars and the report was finished sometime in November of 2005.
- Grizzly Bear Alliance (July 2005) and Jasper Environmental Association (summer 2005) were both denied access, under the provincial Freedom of Information Act, to the report from the first phase of the DNA study
- It will be many years before DNA-based population estimates for the entire province are complete but, the data now in existence for the area between highways 1 and 16 can be compared to the estimated populations for these same areas found in the amended 2003 “Report on Alberta Grizzly Bear Assessment of Allocation” (see below) and extrapolated to give an acceptable and accurate working population estimate for the entire province.

2. Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan

- Grizzly bear recovery team formed in 2003 and comprised of representatives from CAPP, Alberta Forest Products Association, Alberta energy, Western Stock Growers Association, Alberta Fish and Game Association, Universities of Alberta and Calgary, Parks Canada, Alberta Fish and Wildlife, Federation of Alberta Naturalists and one non-voting member representing various ENGOS
- Recovery team submitted draft Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan to Sustainable Resource Development in December 2004
- The plan contains many recommendations for recovering the grizzly bear, including suspending the hunt, better managing human access to grizzly habitat, and protecting key areas for grizzly bears from excessive industrial development
- The government has still not accepted the plan despite having it “under review” for over a year

3. Amended “Report on Alberta Grizzly Bear Assessment of Allocation”

- Authors are Gordon Stenhouse the provincial grizzly bear specialist, Dr. Mark Boyce, ACA Chair in Fisheries and Wildlife at University of Alberta and John Boulanger of Integrated Ecological Research

- Report first released in 2003, looked at grizzly bear population estimates as they related to the allocation of hunting licences and estimated just over 500 grizzlies on lands under provincial jurisdiction (http://www.grizzlybearalliance.org/campaigns_Alberta.html and click on “technical report”)
- An error was found in the model and it was re-run and an amended report was finished in early 2005 but it has not yet been publicly released.
- The Grizzly Bear Alliance was refused access to this document in an access to information request filed in accordance with the provincial freedom of information act in July 2005

4. Human-caused grizzly bear mortality data for 2005

- In the past, the province has released information in mid to late November on the numbers of grizzly bears killed by humans in the province that year including the location and cause of death (ie legal hunt, poaching, self-defense, problem bear, accidental)
- The government will not release the 2005 data until the middle to the end of January when it will be released as part of an analysis of grizzly bear mortality in the province over the last 10 years.
- It is strongly suspected that over 40 grizzly bears were killed by humans in 2005 (including 10 killed in spring hunt). If this is the case, it would be the highest number of grizzlies killed in a single year in the last 10 years.

Status of Grizzly bear in Alberta

- Currently listed under Alberta Wildlife Act as “May be at Risk”
- The Alberta Endangered Species Conservation Committee (ESCC) (<http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/fw/escc>) recommended the grizzly bear be listed as a “Threatened” species in spring of 2002 based on a small population (estimated to be 1000), slow reproductive rate, limited immigration from populations outside Alberta and increasing alteration of habitat
- Never before has a Minister refused to accept the ESCC’s recommendations on listing a species

Alberta Grizzly Bear Population:

- According to the 2004 draft grizzly bear recovery plan, provincial grizzly bear experts agreed there were “less than 700 grizzly bears in Alberta.”
- This estimate of 700 grizzlies is similar to that derived from a government report released in 2003, “Report on Alberta Grizzly Bear Assessment of Allocation” (see above for link) which estimated just over 500 bears on lands under provincial jurisdiction (and another 185 in Alberta’s national parks) giving a total of 700 grizzlies in the entire province.

Alberta Spring Grizzly Bear Hunt

- Decision on hunt traditionally made early in the first week of February
- On average, over the last 10 years, hunting has accounted for 50% of all human-caused grizzly bear mortalities
- There are currently 73 licenses issued each year for the grizzly bear hunt.
- The number of licenses was decreased from 130 to 101 in 2003 and from 101 to 73 in 2004
- Since 2003 when the number of licenses issued was first decreased, the hunt has accounted for 36% of the total known human caused mortalities of grizzly bears
- Alberta government's rationale for continuing the grizzly hunt can be found at <http://www3.gov.ab.ca/srd/fw/hunting/grzzmgmt.html>
- Stopping the hunt will alone, not save Alberta's grizzly bear but it is the most effective and immediate strategy we have available to substantially decrease the unsustainable number of bears killed every year

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