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## Grizzly Hunt Suspension First Step Toward Recovery

By Nigel Douglas, AWA Conservation Specialist

The March 3rd decision by the Alberta government to suspend the spring grizzly bear hunt is just the start toward recovering Alberta's grizzlies: there is still a long way to go. However, we should celebrate the hunt decision and congratulate Minister of Sustainable Resource Development David Coumts on a bold decision. The change of heart on the hunt can be attributed to a number of factors: improved scientific methods for estimating population numbers, improved ministerial accountability, and a large and expressive outpouring of public opinion in support of grizzlies.

### Improving science

Since the 2002 recommendation by the government's Endangered Species Conservation Committee to list the grizzly as "threatened" (using an estimated provincial population figure of 1,000 bears), the science has become ever clearer that the provincial population is not healthy enough to sustain current mortality rates. Although it will take another three to four years to get the best estimates possible through DNA population studies, we already know that there are major problems.

Two of the documents released at the same time as the hunt decision were the detailed DNA population surveys carried out by provincial biologist Gord Stenhouse in 2004 and 2005. The previous best estimate of the provincial grizzly population was the 2003 *Report on Grizzly Bear Assessment of Allocation*, prepared by Gordon Stenhouse, Dr. Mark Boyce, and John Boulanger, which produced a revised population estimate of 700 bears in Alberta.

The newly released DNA figures for 2005 are difficult to compare to the previous studies because they cover different areas, but the 2004 DNA figures are much clearer. In 2003 there were an estimated 147 bears in the area between highways 11 and 16. The more accurate 2004 figures put this number at 53 (or 36 percent of the 2003 estimate). We don't know yet whether this picture is repeated across all grizzly ranges, but it may point to a considerably lower provincial population than previously thought.

### Ministerial accountability

In the last two or three years, decisions on the spring grizzly bear hunt appear to have been simple "rubber stamping" of previous hunt decisions. This year the spotlight was put on Coumts for his department's failure to release important documents to the public and even to the Grizzly Bear Recovery Team, as well as confusion over the status of Recovery Team chair Gord Stenhouse. Questions were asked about whether the government was making objective decisions based on scientific information. The media helpfully covered these issues in detail.

To Coumts' great credit, he decided not to sign off to the hunt as in previous years. Instead he appeared to take the time to analyze the information himself, which led to the unavoidable conclusion that the hunt must be suspended. AWA and other groups were quick to congratulate the Minister on a courageous decision.

### Public opinion

This year more than any other, Albertans made it abundantly clear that, in a province heading for a \$6 billion provincial surplus, they were not prepared to tolerate hunting a species that is threatened in all but





name. Letters flooded in to the newspapers and to the politicians' offices from Alberta and beyond. In a *Calgary Herald* on-line poll the following week, 85 percent of readers agreed with the hunt suspension.

For several years, AWA has concentrated on raising awareness of the spectacular wilderness we have in Alberta and emphasizing the importance of public input in decision-making. Albertans often have to make an enormous effort to have their voices heard, and we need to apply pressure continually to make sure our politicians are listening. So a huge thank you to all of those people who took the time to write or email the Minister or their MLA. You really can make a difference!

### Next Steps

AWA and other groups agree that the spring grizzly hunt is not the cause of our grizzly bear troubles, and suspending the hunt will not recover grizzlies. Recovery of any species, whether grizzly, caribou or swift fox, depends on protecting their habitat. "Everybody focused on the hunt because it is a political minefield," says Dr. Robert Barclay, spokesperson for the provincial Grizzly Bear Recovery Team. "But it is one thing that we can do right away. Of more importance is habitat for the bears and making sure that they have high-quality secure habitat, and that's not nearly as easy a fix."

U.S. grizzly expert Dr. Charles Schwartz carried out a peer review of the 2004 draft Alberta Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan. "I feel it is very important [that] 'regulated hunting' and 'sustainable harvests' are not the 'cause' of grizzly bear declines in Alberta," wrote Schwarz. "Closing hunting seasons gives the false impression to the public that once hunting is closed, all is well for the bears. Hunting is in fact a very minor symptom of a much greater erosion of habitat by humans."

Barclay is confident that the Recovery Team is very aware of the importance of habitat protection. "Around the Recovery Team table are [representatives] from various industries that have an obvious stake in the habitat issue," he says. "It's those industries who are creating the access into grizzly bear habitat through roads, into either forestry or oil and gas development. They recognize that human access into grizzly bear habitat is a key issue."

Ultimately, the role of the Recovery Team is to explain what needs to be done to recover Alberta's grizzlies. Whether there is the political will to do what is needed is another matter. "We're not the decision-makers in the end and there are all sorts of other factors that go into those sorts of decisions," says Barclay. "All we can do is say 'here's what we recommend.'"

Barclay remains cautiously optimistic. "I'm certainly more optimistic than before the Minister's announcement and the release of the data. [The hunt decision] was a surprise. Given what has happened over the last few years I was expecting a reduced hunt still to continue." But counteracting that optimism is the realization that the numbers from the first two censuses seem rather low, lower than previous estimates for those areas, he says.

The Alberta government has begun a number of important initiatives to start along the road to recovering grizzlies. But in isolation, suspending the hunt will not recover grizzlies; counting grizzlies will not recover them; and neither will forming recovery teams. Only if we choose to make substantial changes to how we manage grizzly bear habitat will bears have a long-term future in Alberta. This work needs to begin right now.

