

# Failing Grade for the Draft Grizzly Recovery Plan:

## D- for Disaster

By Joanna Skrajny, AWA Conservation Specialist



**W**ith school back in session it won't be long before students bring their first report cards home. A vital part of our job at AWA is to issue our own report cards on how well our governments are managing your environmental legacy. The Alberta Government has received its own failing grade from AWA on the draft Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan, which it released as summer began. We hope that, like students busy at school, Alberta's public servants are busy revising their draft plan into a final version that will offer the promise to protect the grizzly that this iconic species deserves.

Here's how we reached our conclusion that the draft plan deserves a failing grade. To begin with, this Recovery Plan is long overdue. The 2008 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan expired in 2013 – and despite expectations that it would be renewed at the end of 2013 (or early 2014) with only minor changes, the government decided to undertake a complete rewrite. Three years later, on June 1, 2016, the Government of Alberta finally released its draft Recovery Plan.

I wish when I was marking this plan I could have said "better late than never." I can't for a number of reasons. First, remember the "slacker" in your school projects – the chap who wanted others to do all the work but was prepared to take a healthy part of the credit for the final product? That fellow seems to have written this report, as the Draft's basic premise is "if other places are doing a great job, why should we do anything?"

There's a troubling logic behind the

Plan: that the status of grizzly bears in Alberta could be down-listed from Threatened with fewer than 1,000 mature individuals in the province. This total is the international standard for a genetically viable population. Their justification for this change is due to new information demonstrating that grizzly bears in Alberta are well connected to populations in B.C. and Montana – locales where grizzlies are thriving. In other words, the Recovery Plan essentially says that Alberta doesn't have to take much responsibility for recovering grizzlies since our neighbours are doing such a good job. We can rely on our population being "rescued" by theirs. But, I'm reminded of what Sid Marty said in his Martha Kostuch lecture last year: Montana bears come to Alberta to die.

This other, more responsible view, also suggests that what we do on our side of the political fence matters a whole lot for what happens to grizzlies on the other side. Recent research by Mowat and Lamb in grizzly bear population size and mortality in southeastern BC found that that sub-population declined by 40 percent between 2006 and 2013. The paper outlines that the Highway 3 corridor has created a "sink" area of high mortality; bears move there and have a high probability of dying. Unsurprisingly, on the Alberta side of the border, there have been both an increasing number of grizzly-human conflicts and an increased number of grizzly deaths. The high mortality rates in southwestern Alberta and in B.C. may reflect unsuccessful "rescue" attempts by bears in neighbouring regions - in other words,

although bears may come to Alberta, they come to Alberta to die. All of this means that no matter how successful neighbouring regions may be at recovering grizzlies, Alberta shouldn't ignore its responsibility to maintain secure habitat for its own grizzly population, as it contributes to the greater North American population. It's time for Alberta to pick up the slack and do its part in the group project.

What should you do if a wildlife population hasn't met the goals you set for its recovery? One unfortunate option is to move the goalposts, to set a new threshold that's easier to reach. This seems to be what Alberta is doing. The number of dying grizzlies in southwestern Alberta is so high that the draft plan changed the threshold for what the Alberta government considers to be "acceptable" mortality rate objectives in the area to "less than 6.0%, of which the female mortality does not exceed 1.8%." This increases the number of grizzly deaths that will meet this new interpretation of acceptability. The reasoning behind this increase in acceptable grizzly deaths was that the rate was "adjusted to achieve population maintenance instead of population growth in order to not further exacerbate the very high rates of human-grizzly conflict."

This logic is questionable on two accounts. First, this change in what constitutes acceptable mortality rates has no scientific basis and places the greater Alberta population of grizzlies at greater risk due to their large home ranges. We cannot reasonably expect to increase the number of "acceptable" grizzly deaths and expect



*All types of linear disturbances are an important contributor to the number of grizzly deaths due to humans.* PHOTO: © C. OLSON

them to recover at the same time. Second, human-grizzly conflict will not decrease (no matter how many bears are on the landscape) without proper attractant management and aversive conditioning, since people aren't going away anytime soon. In fact, some population projections for Alberta suggest that more and more people will move into bear country. Instead, we need to help teach Albertans what living with grizzlies means so that we can sustainably recover the population.

Regarding this second point the draft plan provides some hope. It outlines a plan to enhance Alberta's Bearsmart Program, including the hiring of additional human-wildlife conflict management specialists. This is great news because Bearsmart Programs have been proven to be incredibly effective throughout the prov-

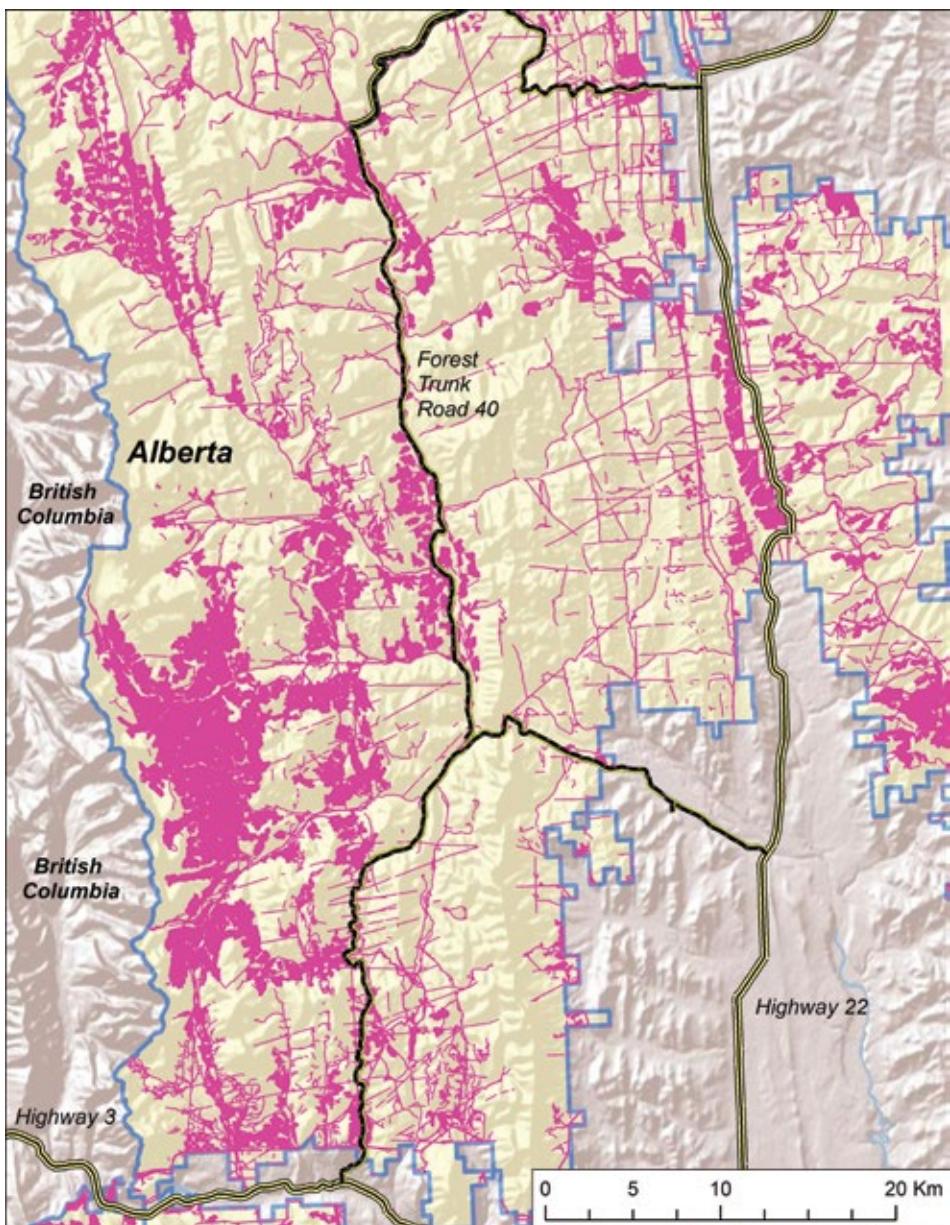
ince, but currently they are often managed with little to no funds on the backs of dedicated volunteers. It will also lighten the load of Fish and Wildlife officers, who spend the bulk of their time dealing with human-wildlife conflicts. We look forward to seeing additional funding to support Bearsmart Programs throughout the province.

Another concerning development in the draft plan is removing the Porcupine Hills from the "Recovery Zone" and designating them as a "Support Zone" in Bear Management Area 5 (BMA 5). This means that there will no longer be a requirement to manage open route density or limit mortalities in the area. This has the potential to increase grizzly deaths and increase relocation away from vital grizzly habitat in the Porcupine Hills.

## **From Open Route to Open Road – the Most Troubling Change**

But another change in the new Grizzly Bear recovery plan is maybe the most concerning, as it will have widespread impacts on the future of Alberta's wild spaces. The new Draft Grizzly Bear Recovery plan proposes to move from Open Route to Open Road density thresholds.

The original Recovery Plan used open routes as a measure of human access into grizzly habitat. Open routes include seismic lines, cutblocks, recreation trails, transmission lines, gravel roads, or any human disturbance that people can use. Grizzly bears avoid humans, so as more people access grizzly habitat, the more grizzlies are displaced out of the best quality habitat and food they require. This puts



*What's the difference between Open Roads and Open Routes? Plenty. This map outlines what these two concepts mean for how we understand the human footprint on the landscape. The black/yellow lines approximate an open road definition; pink areas pinpoint all linear disturbances. Source: P. LEE*

additional stress on these animals. Human access through open routes also threatens grizzlies through direct kills such as poaching, accidental collisions with highway vehicles or trains, self-defense kills (usually by hunters), and hunter error. All of this reaffirms the statement in the 2008 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan: "Human use of access (specifically, motorized vehicle routes) is one of the primary threats to grizzly bear persistence."

Now, the current draft plan only places limits on open roads, which they define as "access that is reasonably drivable with on-highway vehicles." This means that

instead of placing limits on all human disturbances which people can use to venture in grizzly habitat, limits now will only be placed on roads you can use with your beat up Corolla from the 1990s.

The original grizzly plan was unequivocal: "Because human use of access is difficult to measure, open route densities are recommended as a surrogate for amount of human use." This was a reasonable proxy to estimate where and how often people would interact with grizzlies. The new plan ignores a wealth of disturbances which can and most likely are accessed by humans; it turns a blind eye to the

precautionary principle. By arbitrarily and unjustifiably judging these other disturbances to be inconsequential, it also has the perverse potential to encourage further disturbances in Alberta. It turns that same blind eye to the fact Alberta already far exceeds any acceptable disturbance limits for wildlife.

Take, for example, the Livingstone and the Porcupine Hills. They are a part of BMA 5. According to the new definition "open road density is well managed in this BMA with no GBWU [Grizzly Bear Watershed Unit] exceeding expectations." Yet you take one look at the scope of disturbance within the Livingstone and there is no way that you can assess the landscape as healthy. In fact, what you see is a proliferation of human footprint and disturbance on the landscape, the negative effects of which are further exacerbated by motorized recreation on these fragile ecosystems (see map).

It is therefore frankly ridiculous to say that density thresholds should only be placed on roads as "the extent that OHVs contribute to human caused grizzly bear mortality is a knowledge gap." Even within the National Parks, a study in 2000 found that the majority of human-caused bear mortalities fell within 500m of roads and 200m of trails – and trails in National Parks only receive foot traffic! And, even if this imaginary knowledge gap existed, isn't it time we started managing what we do on the land according to the precautionary principle?

And we know that OHV use is at least equally – if not more disturbing – to wildlife than foot traffic. Fortin, Rode, Hilderbrand, Wilder, Farley, Jorgenson and Marcot found that the main impact of recreation on brown bears was that they did everything to avoid people, both by avoiding people physically and in time. All this avoidance increases the bear's energy output and affects their nutritional needs and intake. The study by Graves, Servheen and Godtel on grizzly bears supported these findings. They concluded that bears avoided "areas within 250

- 900m from ATV trails and within 450-600m from single-track trails, which had some motorbike use. [...] Bears were less likely to spend time near trails with high (~5 trips/day average) motorized use than trails with low motorized use." It's therefore unreasonable to believe that we cannot include limits on all human access, especially OHV use, because we don't know enough about their effects! The science is sound and has been established for decades. It's why jurisdictions such as Montana have limits on motorized access and have seen the grizzly population increase. Even if this imaginary knowledge gap existed, we should apply the Precautionary Principle and assume that all disturbance is being used by people to enter grizzly habitat unless we know otherwise.

This draft Recovery Plan is full of shortcomings, with many elements almost resembling a mockery to basic principles of wildlife management. In fact, it so closely resembles satire that it's uncannily similar to the satirical news release AWA put out in 2009 (see the accompanying text box).

To conclude, the proposed draft Recovery Plan fails our grizzlies, species that share critical grizzly habitat, the Alberta public, and fundamental wildlife values. The draft plan which will likely increase the risk this iconic species faces in Alberta. Please contact your MLA and the Minister of Environment and Parks and demand more for this iconic symbol of wilderness. We don't want to assign any more failing grades. ↗

# News Release

## Recovering Grizzly Bears by Re-definition

April 30, 2009

After a seven-year recovery process, Alberta's grizzly bears have now been successfully recovered. This is the startling finding from the *Grizzly Bear Re-definition Program*, a new study by researchers at the Alberta Institute for Anecdotal Evidence (AIAE).

"We knew that recovery of grizzlies was being hampered by motorized vehicle access," says AIAE spokesman Dr. Charles Brain. "So we decided to re-define *motorized vehicle*. And then we decided to re-define *recovery*."

Those re-definitions were so effective that the Institute is now working on re-defining *grizzly bears*, to ensure that the province's grizzly bear recovery process is even more successful.

The pioneering Grizzly Bear Re-definition Program began in 2008, when the term *motorized vehicle* was re-defined to mean "vehicle with a motor, more than 92 inches wide, with more than seven wheels. And red." Subsequently, *motorized vehicle* access into grizzly habitat was considerably reduced.

Following on from this successful re-definition, AIWC moved quickly to re-define the word *recovery*. The word now officially means "Doing exactly what we were doing before, but with the word sustainable in front." Once again, grizzly bear recovery took an enormous step forward.

AIWC is now drafting a new definition for *grizzly bear*. "The working definition for *grizzly bear* is now 'Hairy or non-hairy animal that may or may not have antlers,'" said Dr. Brain. "Or wheels."

"We are proud to bring Alberta's Grizzly Bear Recovery process to such a successful conclusion," said Doris Klein, spokesman for Alberta Sustained Resource Development (AbSuRD). "We are now looking forward to completing successful recovery programs for all endangered wildlife in the province, including woodland caribou, black-footed ferret and wooly mammoth."

Coming soon, the Alberta Institute for Anecdotal Evidence will be using lessons learned from its Grizzly Bear Re-definition Program to solve the thorny old problems of *climate change and death*.