

Notices

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This section of the FEDERAL REGISTER contains documents other than rules or proposed rules that are applicable to the public. Notices of hearings and investigations, committee meetings, agency decisions and rulings, delegations of authority, filing of petitions and applications and agency statements of organization and functions are examples of documents appearing in this section.

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Forest Service

Forest Plan Amendments for Grizzly Bear Habitat Conservation for the Greater Yellowstone Area National Forests

AGENCY: Forest Service, USDA.

ACTION: Notice of intent to prepare an environmental impact statement.

SUMMARY: The purpose of this notice is to inform the public that the Forest Service will prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) to analyze the environmental effects of amendments to land and resource management plans (forest plans) for the Beaverhead, Custer, and Gallatin National Forests located in the state of Montana; the Targhee National Forest located in the states of Idaho and Wyoming; and the Bridger-Teton and Shoshone National Forests located in the state of Wyoming. This notice describes a proposal to amend six forest plans to provide additional programmatic direction for management of grizzly bear habitat security, developed sites, and livestock within the Grizzly Bear Recovery Area.

DATES: Comments concerning the scope of the analysis must be received on or before August 15, 2003. The agency expects to file a draft EIS with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and make it available for public, agency, and tribal government comment in October 2003. The final environmental impact statement is expected to be filed in February 2004.

ADDRESSES: Send written comments to Dave Cawrse, Team Leader, Grizzly Bear Habitat Amendments, Shoshone National Forest, 808 Meadow Lane Avenue, Cody, WY 82414-4549.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Dave Cawrse, Team Leader, telephone (307) 527-6241.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Pursuant to 16 U.S.C. 1604(f)(4) and 36 CFR

219.10(f), the Forest Supervisors give notice that the USDA Forest Service is beginning an environmental analysis and decision making process for this Proposed Action so that interested or affected people can participate in the analysis and contribute to the final decision. The Forest Service is seeking comments from individuals, organizations, tribal governments, and federal, state, and local agencies who are interested in or may be affected by the Proposed Action. The public is invited to help identify issues and define the range of alternatives to be considered in the environmental impact statement. Written comments identifying issues for analysis and the range of alternatives are encouraged.

Purpose and Need for Action

The management of grizzly bear habitat on national forests in the GYA (Greater Yellowstone Area) is a dynamic process. Experience provides the public and land managers with new understanding and insights regarding the conservation of grizzly bear habitat. Scientific research continues to bring forth new theories, observations, and findings relevant to the management of these resources. This learning is continuous. Most importantly, the Yellowstone grizzly bear population has increased over the past 25 years. As a result, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intends to review the status of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population under the Endangered Species Act.

The forest plans for the GYA national forests were approved at various times between 1986 and 1997. Since their approval, the Forest Service has amended these plans. A few of these amendments relate directly to the management of grizzly bear habitat. As a result, existing forest plan direction regarding grizzly bear habitat management varies between six GYA national forests. In addition, the age of forest plan direction regarding grizzly bear habitat management varies from forest to forest.

There is a need to improve the coordination and consistency of forest plan direction in the GYA regarding grizzly bear habitat management, and to update this direction to reflect new management insight, the latest scientific information, and the changing characteristics of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population. Direction for

managing the grizzly bear was recently developed through a nine-year inter-agency effort documented in the "Final Conservation Strategy for The Grizzly Bear in the Greater Yellowstone Area" ("Conservation Strategy"). This "Conservation Strategy" was developed to be the document guiding management and monitoring for the Yellowstone grizzly bear population and its habitat upon recovery and delisting. Additionally, there is a need to clarify the applicability of forest plan grizzly bear habitat management direction if there is a change in the Yellowstone grizzly bear population's status under the Endangered Species Act, and to ensure the long-term recovery and conservation of Yellowstone grizzly bears regardless of their listing as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act.

There is a need for national forests in the GYA to maintain or improve habitat conditions as of 1998, as measured within each subunit within the Recovery Area, while maintaining options for resource management activities at approximately the same level as existed in 1998. The grizzly population achieved all demographic recovery goals by 1998 with this management regime in place.

The purpose of these amendments is to (1) ensure conservation of habitat within the Recovery Area to support continued recovery of the grizzly bear population, (2) update the management and monitoring of grizzly bear habitat to incorporate recent interagency recommendations and agreements, and (3) provide consistency among Greater Yellowstone Area national forests in managing and monitoring grizzly bear habitat.

Proposed Action

The Forest Service proposes to amend the forest plans for the Beaverhead, Bridger-Teton, Custer, Gallatin, Shoshone, and Targhee National Forests to provide additional programmatic direction for management of grizzly bear habitat security, developed sites, and livestock grazing within the Grizzly Bear Recovery Area. The Proposed Action includes a forest-wide goal, standards, and monitoring requirements. The forest-wide goal promotes the continued recovery of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population. Forest-wide standards are (1) maintain