

August 18, 2020

Grand Teton National Park
Supervisor Gopaul Noojibail
P.O. Box 170
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CC: USFWS Director Aurelia Skipwith, and National Park Service Director Margaret Everson

Supervisor Noojibail:

This letter is to inquire about protections for grizzly bears in relation to the scheduled mountain goat cull that is slated to occur September 14 – November 13 in Grand Teton National Park. We have concerns about the impact this hunt will have on grizzly bears in the park and the potential risk that the “skilled volunteers” (volunteer hunters) may present to grizzlies.

The Endangered Species Act requires federal agencies, in consultation with a federal wildlife agency (the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for grizzly bears), to insure that any proposed action is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of a listed species. 16 U.S.C. § 1536(a)(2). Before this culling begins, GTNP must consult with FWS to properly determine the impacts to grizzlies that may result from hunters being present in high elevation at a time when grizzly bears are in hyperphagia and are also in higher elevations eating army cutworm moths.

To carry out the consultation mandates, GTNP must first prepare a “biological assessment” to determine whether grizzly bears, which are present in the action area, may be affected by the proposed action. Id. § 1536(c)(1); 50 C.F.R. § 402.12. If it is determined that the agency action “may affect” but is “not likely to adversely affect” a listed species or its critical habitat, the regulations permit “informal consultation,” after which FWS must concur in writing with the agency’s determination. 50 C.F.R. §§ 402.14(a), (b). If the agency determines that the action is “likely to adversely affect” a listed species or critical habitat, or if FWS does not concur with the agency’s “not likely to adversely affect” determination, the agency must engage in “formal consultation,” as outlined in 50 C.F.R. § 402.14. Id. §§ 402.02, 402.14(a).

Volunteer hunters will be in high elevations at the same time as bears are looking for moths and eating other foods in preparation for hibernation. Hunters have been involved in conflicts with grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem at an increased rate in the past with usually fatal outcomes for the bear. What actions will be taken to ensure that grizzly bears are not subjected to harassment by hunters or increased risk of death from encounters with the volunteer hunters who will be on the landscape?

Every precaution should be taken to prepare all “skilled volunteers” to be ready to encounter bears so that no bears are harmed during the culling. Hunters are usually doing many of the activities that people are advised against doing when in bear country like masking their scent, moving stealthily, traveling alone or with only one other person, and being in close proximity to carcasses. Grand Teton National Park is a safe haven for all wildlife, especially grizzly bears. We remain concerned that bears will encounter these hunters and would like an assurance from the Park Service that every measure will be

taken to ensure bears remain safe within the confines of the boundaries of the park. Furthermore, we believe that GTNP must consult with FWS before undertaking this agency action, as required by the ESA.

Thank you for your consideration, we look forward to hearing from you on this matter.

Sincerely,

Kristin Combs
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Reference: The Endangered Species Act. Public Law 16 U.S.C. §§1531-1544. (1973).