

Federal agencies are yet again considering plans to bring **grizzly bears** home to the deep forested valleys of the North Cascades where they once thrived.

The National Park Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service announced Thursday they would look at options to bring back the big brown bears.

"This is a first step toward bringing balance back to the ecosystem and restoring a piece of the Pacific Northwest's natural and cultural heritage," Superintendent Don Striker of North Cascades National Park said in a news release. "With the public's help we will evaluate a list of options to determine the best path forward."

Grizzly bears roamed across the North Cascades for thousands of years before humans hunted them to near-extinction. The bears were a critical part of the ecosystem, turning soil as they dug for roots, eating berries and distributing the seeds in their scat, and keeping small animal populations in check.

According to the latest estimates by biologists, it's likely that fewer than 10 **grizzly bears** remain in the North Cascades. The last confirmed sighting of a grizzly bear in the U.S. portion of the North Cascades was in 1996, according to the National Park Service.

In 2014, under the Obama administration, federal officials announced a grizzly recovery study. In mid-2017, officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior, without clear explanation, halted progress on the recovery efforts. The process kicked back into gear in 2019, but that effort was again squelched by Interior, under the Trump administration, in 2020.

Now, the North Cascades Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Environmental Impact Statement process is back on. It will include considering a nonessential experimental population designation under the Endangered Species Act.

Thursday's announcement was lauded by environmental advocates.

"They belong here," Joe Scott, international program director for Conservation Northwest, said in a statement. "Without them our wild areas are diminished, less diverse and sanitized. The narrative about Cascades grizzly bear recovery will take decades to unfold. But with science, education and a little human tolerance it can be one of the greatest conservation success stories of ours and future generations."

Central Washington's Republican U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse was quick to criticize the plan.

"The introduction of **grizzly bears** into the North Cascades would directly, and negatively, impact the people and the communities I represent," Newhouse said in a statement.

He said reintroducing the bears would be a threat to families, wildlife and livestock.

During previous planning efforts, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and other ranching groups have opposed reintroduction.

Newhouse also wrote letters in opposition during past planning processes, claiming there was not "adequate" public input.

In 2017, agencies received more than 126,000 public comments.

Under the proposal, the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife would capture bears from either British Columbia or the Northern Continental Divide of the U.S. About three to seven would be released in the North Cascades each year, over the course of about five to 10 years. The agencies would aim to establish an initial population of 25 bears.

Within a century, the agencies would aim to have a population of about 200 bears.

The North Cascades are among the largest wild areas in the contiguous 48 states, encompassing close to 10,000 square miles. Scientists identified the mountain range as prime habitat for grizzly bear reintroduction in 1997, like it had been for thousands of years.

“The Upper Skagit people coexisted with **grizzly bears** in the region for nearly 10,000 years pre-contact,” Scott Schuyler, policy representative for the Upper Skagit Tribe, said in a statement. “The grizzly has profound cultural significance and its restoration will enrich our ancestral lands and help restore the foundations of our cultural practices.”

Four virtual public meetings will be held to gather input on the proposal over the next month. People are also invited to submit comments online.

To comment on the proposal, go to st.news/grizzly-proposal.

Copyright (c) 2022 The Seattle Times