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Protections Restored for Yellowstone Grizzly Bears

Bozeman, MT – A federal district court today ordered Endangered Species Act protections reinstated for the Yellowstone area’s iconic grizzly bear population. The court overturned the delisting of Yellowstone’s grizzly bears because of inadequate state laws and the ongoing demise of whitebark pine caused by global warming.

Yellowstone grizzlies rely on high-fat seeds of whitebark pine as a key food source in critical months before hibernation. Warming temperatures have enabled mountain pine beetles to kill high-altitude whitebark pine trees at alarming rates. Availability of whitebark pine seeds is essential to female grizzly bear reproductive success. Because they grow in high, remote places, whitebark pine forests also keep grizzly bears out of harm’s way: in poor seed years, grizzlies seek foods elsewhere, bumping into people more and dying at rates two to three times higher than in good seed years.

Grizzly bears in the lower 48 states were reduced to one percent of their historic range and one to two percent of their historic numbers due to persecution, poisoning, predator control efforts, livestock grazing, sport hunting and habitat destruction associated with the march of human development. More than 270 scientists urged the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service not to delist the Yellowstone grizzly bear population.

Under the invalidated delisting decision, more than 40 percent of currently occupied grizzly bear habitat in the Yellowstone ecosystem received no habitat protection. Nearly 2 million acres of high-quality grizzly bear habitat was opened to increased motorized access, more than 630,000 acres were opened for logging, and more than 850,000 acres were opened to oil and gas development in the Yellowstone ecosystem. With today’s court ruling, these lands are once again governed by Endangered Species Act protections. Now that Yellowstone grizzlies are again listed as a threatened species, the federal government can develop a new recovery plan that takes into account the ravages of global warming. It will require a new recovery zone that protects more bear habitat so that bears can withstand the impacts of global warming.

“FWS argued that because Yellowstone grizzly bears were omnivores, they would adapt to the loss of their key food source – the fatty seeds of whitebark pine trees. Because all of the science said that in the Yellowstone ecosystem whitebark pine drives grizzly bear reproductive and mortality rates, the judge rightly rejected the government’s ‘let them eat cake’ approach to recovery,” said Doug Honnold, one of the lawyers on the case.

Earthjustice aided lead counsel Jack Tuholske in the Greater Yellowstone Coalition case filed in Montana, in which Judge Molloy invalidated the delisting decision.

In a related case in Idaho, Earthjustice and Advocates for the West represent the Western Watersheds Project, Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, Center for Biological Diversity, Great Bear Foundation, and the Jackson Hole Conservation Alliance.

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