

A THREAT TO SPORTSMEN'S INVESTMENT IN STATE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

CONSERVATION
POLICY COLUMN



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Ask anyone in the wildlife management profession, and they'll tell you that the successful recovery of an endangered species is no easy task. Logic would dictate that bringing a species back from the brink is a conservation success story and should be celebrated as such. Unfortunately—as many of my fellow Club members know—common sense doesn't always win the day, especially here in Washington, D.C., and we find ourselves facing another example of Congress tinkering with species recovery and state fish and wildlife agencies' management authority.

H.R. 2532—also called the Tribal Heritage and Grizzly Bear Protection Act—seeks to ban the regulated harvest of grizzly bears and declare that grizzlies shall forevermore be managed as a federal trust species. Supporters of the bill have noted that it's a direct response to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) finding that grizzly bears have sufficiently recovered in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) and are no longer in need of Endangered Species Act (ESA) protections.

What does that mean? First and foremost, it means that proponents of the bill are skeptical that state conservation professionals can manage wildlife effectively. Collectively, state fish and wildlife agencies have a \$5.63 billion budget, employ almost 35,000 professionals, which includes 11,000 biologists, of which 6,000 have advanced degrees

and more than 700 professionals hold top degrees (PhDs, DVMs, etc.). For comparison's sake, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—the federal agency tasked with endangered species recovery—has just under 8,500 full-time employees and an annual budget just under \$3 billion (this figure includes a significant portion that's allocated to state fish and wildlife agencies). Going by the numbers, it's undeniable that state agencies have the edge when it comes to investment, dedicated funding and expertise.

H.R. 2532's movement through the House Natural Resources Committee also means that its supporters have gone out of their way to ignore the investments that state fish and wildlife agencies like Idaho Fish and Game, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and Wyoming Game and Fish have made in grizzly recovery. Between 2009 and 2018, the state of Wyoming alone spent more than \$16 million on grizzly bear recovery. During this same time period, the federal government gave Wyoming Game and Fish an average of about \$100,000 annually to work on grizzly recovery through the ESA, a fraction of the state's investment each year.

By way of background, the outdated and draconian practices of the 19th and early 20th centuries led to unregulated market hunting, habitat loss, and increased human-wildlife conflict that nearly resulted in the extirpation of grizzlies from the GYE. In 1975, when grizzlies

were listed under the ESA, wildlife scientists estimated the grizzly bear population consisted of less than 200 animals in the GYE area.

Through many years of collaborative state, federal, public and private wildlife management and research conducted by groups like the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, an interdisciplinary group of scientists and biologists responsible for long-term monitoring and research efforts on grizzly bears, the grizzly population has significantly rebounded to more than 700 bears. This level is near, or already at, the GYE's grizzly carrying capacity, a clear indicator that cooperative management and conservation to recover species can work. As a result of this recovery, in June 2017, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a final rule to remove the GYE population from the Federal list of threatened and endangered wildlife. However, this final rule was overturned in a district court and now is further threatened by H.R. 2532.

At its most basic level, the Endangered Species Act is both a "carrot" and a "stick" in that it creates a system offering a combination of reward and punishment to induce good behavior. The cooperation that led to the FWS's determination that GYE grizzly bears have been recovered was motivated by both a desire to avoid limitations associated with managing a listed species and a desire to recover the species to the point where these limitations would no longer be necessary to ensure the long-term viability of populations.

By removing the delisting "carrot" from the equation, H.R. 2532 proposes an undue burden on states and federal agencies that have done their best to recover grizzlies in accordance with the law. The credibility of the ESA is dependent upon the successful transfer of wildlife management authority to state fish and wildlife agencies upon recovery. This legislation does not further that goal and may very well undermine future efforts to recover species in a cooperative fashion.

The Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation (CSF) recognizes that the goals of the ESA are laudable and deserve support, but legislation like H.R. 2532—paired with endless legal challenges to professional biologists' recovery findings and a disdain for state wildlife management—inflicts far more harm on species conservation efforts than it does to help them. That's why here at CSF, we are leading the charge to defeat H.R. 2532 and other misguided efforts that threaten the integrity of the sportsmen's significant investment in state-based fish and wildlife management. We welcome you to join us in this fight; the future of conservation depends on it. ■

For more information about the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation, please visit www.congressionalsportsmen.org.