United States Department of the Interior

Fish and Wildlife Service

Ecological Services
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In reply refer to:
File: M19 Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (I)
06E11000-2018-I-0089 Fleecer Mountains

December 4, 2017

Melany Glossa, Forest Supervisor
Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest
420 Barrett Street
Dillon, Montana 59725

Dear Ms. Glossa:

This letter is in response to your September 15, 2017 request for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) review and consultation on the Fleecer Mountains Project (Fleecer Project). Effects of the project were analyzed for federally listed and proposed threatened and endangered species. The Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (Forest) has determined that the proposed project may affect but is not likely to adversely affect grizzly bears (*Ursus arctos horribilis*) or Canada lynx (*Lynx canadensis*). The proposed action is located in the Fleecer Mountain Range, approximately four miles northwest of Wise River, on the Butte Ranger District of the Forest.

The Fleecer Project proposes several vegetation management actions on approximately 3,043 acres including salvage harvest of lodgepole pine, commercial thin of Douglas-fir stands, precommercial thin old harvest units, noncommercial removal of Douglas-fir from grass-shrub parks, and conifer removal in riparian-associated and upland aspen stands. The project also proposes aquatic improvements including fish barrier installations and culvert replacements. Approximately 5.88 miles of temporary road will be constructed, used, and then obliterated after use. The biological assessment (U.S. Forest Service 2017) provides further details regarding the proposed action.

In 2010, the Service issued a biological opinion to the Forest on the effects of the Revised Forest Plan. The 2010 consultation analyzed the effects of the Revised Forest Plan on grizzly bears in those areas of the Forest where, at the time, we considered grizzly bears as being present or where grizzly bears might occur during the life of the plan. This portion of the Forest encompassed the Yellowstone analysis area which included the Madison, Gravelly, and Tobacco Root landscapes in their entirety, and a small portion of the Jefferson River and Upper Clark Fork landscapes to include the Highland Mountains. At the time, grizzly bears were known to

occur in the Madison and Gravelly landscapes. Since the 2010 biological opinion was completed, new information indicated verified observations of grizzly bears on the Forest outside of the Yellowstone analysis area. In addition, grizzly bear populations in both the YGBE to the south and east and the NCDE to the north continue to expand their range albeit slowly in some areas, and so we expect that additional grizzly bears may inhabit more portions of the Forest than just the Yellowstone analysis area. Thus, in 2013 we provided a supplemental biological opinion addressing impacts to grizzly bears across the entire Forest. In addition to the Yellowstone analysis area we describe the remaining Forest as the west and north analysis area (WNAA). The Fleecer Project action area is within the WNAA, as described in the 2013 supplemental biological opinion to the 2010 biological opinion (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2013). While the 2013 biological opinion describes some potential for significant or adverse effects at some point in the future related to existing access conditions and temporary road construction, it also describes how such effects are unlikely for several years in some areas of the WNAA.

Grizzly bears have been documented on the Forest and have been confirmed in areas close to the action area but have not been confirmed within the action area. It is possible that grizzly bears may be present and may travel through the action area as transients. Due to the very low number of confirmed bear occurrences surrounding the action area, the potential for disturbance from the Fleecer Project is unlikely and discountable. However, if a grizzly bear were to occur in the immediate vicinity of the proposed activity, localized disturbance effects that would be temporary and insignificant may occur. Any such disturbance is not expected to reduce an individual grizzly bear's ability to move through the area. In addition, the vegetation treatment is not expected to result in significant habitat changes to grizzly bear habitat features such as cover, foraging, and/or denning habitat. All activities associated with the proposed action would be subject to the Forest's food storage requirements, thus reducing the potential for human/grizzly bear conflicts. With such measures taken to minimize the potential for grizzly bear-human conflicts, the effects of such conflicts are expected to be discountable.

As explained in the 2013 supplemental biological opinion, the effects of displacement and under-use of habitat are tempered by local resource availability, resource condition, seasonal use, and the number of grizzly bears using an area. Currently, the number of grizzly bears using the WNAA is very low and numbers will increase relatively slowly over time. This is especially true for female grizzly bears. As described in Proctor et al. (2012), males move more frequently and over longer distances than females. Males have large home ranges and establish home ranges nearly three times further away from their mother's home ranges than do female offspring. Females usually establish smaller home ranges than males that overlap with their mother's home range (Waser and Jones 1983; Schwartz et al. 2003). In doing so, they generally disperse over much shorter distances than male grizzly bears (McLellan and Hovey 2001; Proctor et al. 2004). Therefore, female dispersal is a multi-generational process where females must live year-round in an area, successfully reproduce, and offspring disperse into adjacent, unoccupied habitat. Thus, female grizzly bear presence on the Forest is likely to increase only slowly if and when population pressure from the NCDE or the YGBE grows. The earliest detections of grizzly bears from the NCDE found in the intervening area between the NCDE and the YBGE were male, and males make up most of the known occurrences in this region (Mace

and Roberts 2012, Peck et al. 2017). Male grizzly bears have larger home ranges than females, and males and subadults are independent, more mobile, and do not have the same energetic needs as adult females. In general, while displacement from roads may affect behavioral patterns of males and subadults, such as feeding or sheltering, we do not anticipate such effects to be significant to subadult or male grizzly bears.

Under-use of habitat in proximity to Forest roads by grizzly bears does not necessarily preclude use or form a barrier to dispersal and movement across the landscape. Until numbers substantially increase, grizzly bears that may be present on the Forest and moving into the Forest in the near future, including the Fleecer Project action area, would not likely face significant competition for habitat and resources from other grizzly bears. Thus, displacement from quality habitat is not likely to result in adverse effects to individuals, as they are likely to have options to move to other areas to find resources. As of 2016, no grizzly bears have been verified within the Fleecer Project action area (U.S. Forest Service 2017). Based on the low to no use of the action area by grizzly bears and considering the low levels of intra-specific competition, if a grizzly bear were to be using the action area, we do not expect effects to rise to levels of injury (through displacement) by high road densities at this time. In addition, no net change in open motorized road and trail density or secure habitat would occur from the proposed action. Thus, the existing access condition and proposed temporary road construction and use within the action area is not likely to result in adverse effects to grizzly bears.

In summary, as described in the biological assessment for the Fleecer Project, it is extremely unlikely that a grizzly bear would be in the action area, and even less likely to be in the smaller project implementation area. If a grizzly bear were to be present within the project or action area during implementation, any effects are expected to be insignificant and/or discountable. The biological assessment provides further discussion on the effects of the proposed action.

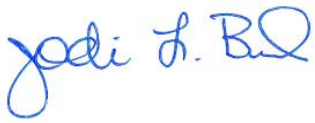
The proposed action is located within unoccupied, secondary Canada lynx habitat or a ‘secondary area’ as defined in the Canada Lynx Recovery Outline (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2005) and Revised Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy (Interagency Lynx Biology Team 2013). Secondary areas only support lynx intermittently and any lynx use of the action area would be considered transient. Recent verified observations of lynx within the action area have not occurred and lynx are not likely to be found in the action area during proposed activities. Therefore, the likelihood of disturbance to transient lynx is discountable. If transient lynx were to be in a project area during implementation, the potential disturbance is not expected to result in significant effects or reduce an individual’s ability to move through the area. In addition, the effects to lynx habitat would be minimal and would not significantly affect how transient lynx would use the habitat. The Northern Rockies Lynx Management Direction was considered for the proposed action and applicable standards and guidelines will be met. The proposed action would not impede lynx movement and does not reduce habitat connectivity. Treatments are not expected to preclude any future use of the area by transient lynx. Consequently, effects to lynx would be discountable and/or insignificant.

Upon review of the biological assessment, the Service concurs with the Forest's determinations that the proposed action may affect, but is not likely to adversely affect the threatened grizzly bear or threatened Canada lynx. The Service bases its concurrence on the information and analysis in the biological assessment prepared by Anne Roberts, Wildlife Biologist, and information in our files.

This Project should be re-analyzed if new information reveals effects of the action that may affect listed or proposed species or designated or proposed critical habitat in a manner or to an extent not considered in this consultation; if the action is subsequently modified in a manner that causes an effect to a listed or proposed species or designated or proposed critical habitat that was not considered in this consultation; and/or, if a new species is proposed or listed or critical habitat is proposed or designated that may be affected by this Project.

This concludes informal consultation pursuant to the regulations implementing section 7(a)(2) of the Endangered Species Act, 50 C.F.R. 402.13. We appreciate your efforts to ensure the conservation of threatened and endangered species as part of your responsibilities under the Endangered Species Act, as amended. If you have questions or comments related to this consultation, please contact Katrina Dixon at 406-449-5225, extension 222.

Sincerely,



Jodi L. Bush
Office Supervisor

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