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Jim Brown - January 10, 2013

Montana Wool Growers Association

*TESTIMONY OF
JIM BROWN IN
SUPPORT OF HB 322 AND*



322

Grizzlies/Livestock

In June of 2012, a female grizzly bear killed more than 70 sheep in north central Montana during a two week period. The kills occurred at three separate ranches, all located within 40 miles of Great Falls.

The kills did not occur on ranches located proximate to a national forest, nor did they occur on a remote federal grazing allotment. Rather, the kills occurred on the open plains – in an area where grizzlies had not been seen in years.

This incident highlights the growing management challenge grizzlies are presenting to federal and state wildlife managers, and to Montana's agriculture industry.

On the one hand, the fact that grizzly bears are being found in greater and greater numbers on the plains is a testament to the concerted effort to bring the grizzly bear population in Montana back from the brink of extinction. Grizzly bears in Montana have been managed under the auspices of the Federal Endangered Species Act since 1975. As a result, and as a result of a population growth rate of roughly three percent, the federal government has determined that the grizzly bear population around Yellowstone Park and in other areas of Montana is recovered, and that management of the species can be turned over to the State of Montana. Unfortunately, lawsuits by so-called environmental groups have prevented those delisting efforts from occurring – though the writing is on the wall and delisting will eventually occur.

While all Montanans can celebrate the success of the grizzly bear recovery efforts, there is a reality that comes along with grizzly bear population growth.

These realities are as follows

First, Montana's wildlife managers and officials need to be immediately prepared to manage the species once the primary responsibility for the population is turned over from the federal government to the State.

Second, as exemplified by the large sheep kill referenced earlier, the number of conflicts between humans and livestock and grizzly bears is sure to increase – a reality that will require policy makers and wildlife management personnel to make difficult, but informed choices as to how best to protect bears, humans, and livestock.

The discussion has already begun about reinstating a grizzly bear hunt in Montana as one tool to manage the growth of the grizzly bear population. The hunt seems to be a popular idea. However, hunting grizzly bears should not be seen as the end-all, be-all tool for managing the species once they are delisted. Rather, like Montana's gray wolf management plan, Montana needs to implement and to carry out a comprehensive management plan for grizzlies. Further, Montana needs to have a clearly identified source of funds that can be used for grizzly bear management purposes, and for the purpose of compensating livestock owners for losses due to grizzly bear attacks.

At present, because the grizzly bear is treated as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, livestock owners are not compensated by either the federal or the State of Montana for losses that occur as a result of grizzly kills.

It is easy for the listener of this program to imagine the devastating emotional loss experienced by the ranchers who had their sheep killed during last June's grizzly rampage. What may be hard for the listener to image is the real amount of economic loss suffered by those ranchers. Death loss is only a small portion of the actual economic injury to ranchers. Economic loss is also caused by stress on livestock due

to the presence of bears, which results in reduced weight gain, lower pregnancy rates and higher veterinary bills for stock that are injured by a bear attack. When all losses are factored in, the losses in Montana alone amounts to hundreds of thousands of dollars due to grizzly and wolf predation. Again, unlike the current compensation provided by the State of Montana for depredations on livestock by wolves, ranchers who have livestock killed by grizzlies do not get compensated for those kills by the state or federal government. Those losses result in money being directly taken out of their pocket.

In December, the Montana Wool Growers Association gathered together in Billings to hold their annual convention. At that convention, the members of Montana's sheep industry discussed extensively the present and future problems associated with Montana's growing grizzly bear population. Concerns were raised that neither federal nor state wildlife managers had adequate plans in place to ensure proper management of the species once they are delisted. Further, concerns were raised about where the funding will come from once management is turned over to Montana. The Woolgrowers saw the need to be proactive, rather than reactive, on this issue.

To address these concerns, Montana's sheep producers will be seeking to pass two bills through the 2013 Montana Legislature to address these pressing issues.

If enacted, the first bill will authorize Montana's Livestock Loss Board to compensate Montanans for livestock losses that occur as a result of grizzly bear kills. At present, state law allows the Livestock Board Loss Board to compensate livestock owners for verified wolf depredations. That's good policy as it recognizes that livestock producers should not have to bear the financial burden of the decision made to reintroduce wolves into Montana.

And so should it be with grizzly bears. While Montana's ranching and farming community supports efforts to get grizzly bears off of the endangered species list, it is widely recognized that agriculture cannot be expected to assume the true cost associated with the growth in grizzly bear numbers. If passed, this common sense bill simply recognizes this reality by extending the livestock loss's board's authority to mitigate damage done to livestock producers by another large predator species, the grizzly bear, while, at the same time redressing a huge hole in grizzly bear management by providing a clearly identified source of funding for this purpose.

The second bill addresses the other missing piece of grizzly bear management – the need to prevent livestock grizzly bear conflicts in the first instance. Everyone can agree that the best grizzly bear management practices are those that prevent bears from getting into trouble with either livestock or humans. In the past, Montana's sheep industry has worked to institute pro-active programs to prevent wolf-livestock conflicts. Such programs include putting up fencing, employing livestock protection dogs and noise makers, and using proper carcass removal methods in order to keep bears away from sheep. These programs are not always successful, but they are helpful in reducing losses.

Based on past experience, these types of prevention programs, if adequately funded, could prove even more effective when applied to grizzly bears. This is because grizzly bears can be more easily dissuaded than wolves from preying on livestock by human measures.

Again, the problem with implementing these non-lethal preventative measures is that very little to no funding is available for this purpose. To meet this funding need, a bill will be introduced to provide for \$600,000 in state funding to the Livestock Loss Board. That money would then be allocated out to ranchers, associations, and wildlife managers to implement steps designed to reduce, minimize, and curtail conflicts between bears and humans and bears and domestic animals – a win-win scenario.

Like a majority of Montanans, Montana's sheep and wool producers understand that wildlife plays an important and enriching role in our lives. And that is why the MWGA's membership has taken an active role in working with both state and federal wildlife officials on grizzly bear management plans and policies. However, because ranches and farms are increasingly becoming grizzly habit as grizzly numbers grow, and knowing the economic devastation that can be done to their operations by predator kills such as the one mentioned in the lead of this editorial, the sheep industry will continue to be active in pushing state and federal officials to support and fund programs that are vital to the economic survival of Montana's top economic industry—the livestock industry.

The sheep industry supports the legislative proposals discussed to authorize the state to pay livestock producers for losses incurred as the result of grizzly bear kills and to provide funding for grizzly conflict reduction efforts. If implemented, these programs will help to speed up the recovery of Montana's grizzly bear population, will allow for grizzly bears to expand their range while lessening the risk of grizzly conflicts,, and will help the state keep its promise to the livestock industry to mitigate damage caused by growing predator populations. The sheep industry asks for your, the listener's, support for those programs as well.

Jim Brown is the Public Relations Director for the Montana Wool Growers Association, which represents Montana's sheep and wool products. The Wool Growers Association is the oldest agriculture association in Montana.

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