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## **METRO PARKS TACOMA SUPPORTS REINTRODUCING GRIZZLIES TO NORTH CASCADES**

*Park Board endorses plan to restore population of iconic bears in one of their native Northwest ranges*

TACOMA, Wash. – Grizzly bears, iconic Northwest animals that play a key role in the ecosystem, are in urgent need of conservation action and should be reintroduced to remote areas of the North Cascades, the Metro Parks Tacoma Board of Commissioners said Monday night.

The board unanimously approved a resolution in favor of a draft Environmental Impact Statement proposal to incrementally increase the number of grizzlies, also known as brown bears, in a 9,500-mile swath of the North Cascades over the next five to 10 years. Fewer than 10 bears remain in the region.

“Metro Parks is committed to environmental stewardship and conservation,” Board of Commissioners President Andrea Smith said. “We support restoring this important species to one of its native ranges in Washington state.”

The vote on the resolution was 4-0, with one member absent from the meeting.

Metro Parks Tacoma owns and operates Northwest Trek Wildlife Park and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium, both of which are dedicated to the conservation of wildlife. Both zoos also are members of Friends of the North Cascades Grizzly Bear, which advocates for and conducts research regarding the bears.

The proposal endorsed by the Board of Commissioners is one of four options in a draft of the North Cascades Ecosystem Grizzly Bear Restoration Plan/Environmental Impact Statement. The National Park Service and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service are carefully weighing the alternatives on the future of the bears.

The option favored by the park board is known as Alternative C, under which wildlife scientists would slowly release grizzly bears into remote areas of North Cascades National Park with an initial goal of 25 bears over the five-to-10-year period.

The federal agencies are taking public comment on the draft environmental impact statement through March 14. Information on the proposal is available here: [www.nwtrek.org/grizzlybears](http://www.nwtrek.org/grizzlybears).

The board’s resolution will be submitted as part of that 60-day public comment period. Input from government agencies and community members is considered an important factor in influencing the decision-making process of federal officials as to which option they choose.

The endorsement by Metro Parks Tacoma dovetails with both the mission of the park district and the wildlife park it owns and operates.

“Grizzly bears are crucial to maintaining plant and animal diversity in Cascade forests,” Northwest Trek Wildlife Park Zoological Curator Marc Heinzman said. “We are pleased that we can help educate our community about the many very good reasons for gradually re-introducing them to remote areas of our region.”

Northwest Trek has demonstrated its commitment to grizzly bear conservation and education for nearly a quarter century. The wildlife park's popular bear exhibit opened in 1993.

Heinzman, who is on the Friends of North Cascades Grizzly Bears steering committee, said he believes Alternative C is the most effective option in the draft EIS.

"It's the best choice for accomplishing the goal of restoring a viable population of grizzlies to the North Cascades in a responsible way," he said.

An estimated 50,000 grizzly bears roamed North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But over time, the population declined dramatically, and in 1975, the grizzly bear was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. It is estimated that fewer than 10 bears remain in the 9,800-square mile North Cascades recovery zone, one of six in the West identified by the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and other federal agencies.

With such a small number of animals in such a large area, it is nearly impossible for the bears to find each other and breed. Grizzly bears play an important role in healthy ecosystems, spreading seeds from plants on which they feed and distributing marine and aquatic nutrients from fish. Their prolific digging also helps aerate soils at high elevations.

Ultimately, a diverse ecosystem benefits humans and other species.

"Grizzly bears are one of the great engineers of the natural world, working every day to help the environment flourish," Heinzman said. "Northwest Trek and Metro Parks are all about the conservation of the natural world. That's why we support this resolution."

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