Section 7 Effects Analysis for Grizzly Bears:
Application of the December 2020 'Species May be Present' Map

Situation Summary: The recent release of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (Service) new methodology and associated map of where grizzly bears 'may be present' (MBP)[1] has generated questions related to Section 7 responsibilities due to differences from the Service's previous (2019) map for the state of Montana (see attached comparison map). Montana Forest Service units are looking for additional guidance regarding which map layer to use for their assessments, particularly if the 2019 layer was used for consultation purposes in late 2019 or 2020, but those areas are no longer considered as MBP for an upcoming 2021 management proposal (i.e., forest plan or project specific).

Key Points: The December 2020 Service map provides a biologically defensible methodology for determining where grizzly bears may be present based on verified occurrences (i.e. sightings, mortalities, radio-telemetry data). As such, it should be used when determining where you MUST consider grizzly bears in your Section 7 effects analysis. Specifically, the 2020 methodology includes twelve order HUCs and sometimes adjacent HUCs of known occurrences. Previous iterations (including the 2019 map) included a more broad-scale approach to include areas that grizzly bears may be using, which were bounded by county or major roads~~,~~ and other geographic features to define the limits of mapping boundaries. Their previous 2019 map and its broad scale approach captured potential travel routes or other areas used by dispersing or transient grizzly bears that are unknown or have not been verified. Not all grizzly bear use may be known or verified based on professional knowledge of grizzly bear biology in Montana[2].

The Forest Service may choose to consider areas outside the 2020 mapped areas in their effects analysis, particularly in regard to 'islands' of MBP and large gaps of MBP adjacent to areas or islands of MBP displayed on the map. This would capture the potential for transient use or dispersal movements that are unknown or have not been verified. Those decisions should consider the likelihood of grizzly bears using the area currently or in the near future during the length of time needed to implement/complete ~~the~~ a proposed project. Hence, short term project proposals may not necessitate expansion beyond the 2020 boundaries~~,~~ while revised Forest Planning efforts or projects implemented over the long term (e.g. 10+ years) are more likely to consider the entire landscape as MBP to avoid future need to reinitiate consultation as bears expand into new areas over the life of the plan. This decision should be made on a case-by-case basis by each unit based on project planning and local grizzly bear occurrence information. Units which consulted on their entire landscape (i.e., during forest plan revision or re-consultation on their existing Forest Plan) may decide consultation is not required, per the 2020 MBP boundaries, during an interim project-specific review.

Regional guidance regarding grizzly bear effects analysis related to motorized activities outside recovery zones has been at the forefront of ~~the~~ Regional Terrestrial Consultation Team discussions for the past few years. A small working group intends to present a draft guidance document on this subject to the larger group in June of 2021. Once complete, this guidance should help streamline questions related to FS approach in their BAs and sideboard considerations for effects calls.

Commented [JAFKM1]: Correct term is "12-digit HUC".

Commented [JAFKM2]: Not quite sure what this means. Might be worded more explicitly.

[1] **May be Present** = The "may be present" map encompasses areas in which grizzly bears have established home ranges and the potential movement of transitory bears through a project area based on verified grizzly bear locations. **Occupied** = Areas in which bears have established home ranges and continuously reside. Estimated distributions do not include low-density peripheral locations and represent a minimum known area of occupancy, not extent of occurrence.

[2] Montana includes portions of four grizzly bear ecosystems with a high density of grizzly bears in and around the NCDE and GYE.