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FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER

PROTECTING WILD CLEARWATER COUNTRY SINCE 1987

Securing Wolverine Recovery in the Big Wild

Protecting an iconic carnivore of the alpine West

Big Wild Initiative II: Wildlife Corridors and Connectivity

September, 2026

A wolverine in Glacier Nat'l Park. Tyler Grudowski image.

Friends of the Clearwater

THE BIG WILD

THE LARGEST WILD PLACE IN THE LOWER 48

CARNIVORE CORRIDORS

FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER

LEADERSHIP

Friends of the Clearwater

PARTNERSHIPS

Partners in the corridor including Friends of the Bitterroot, WildEarth Guardians, Wilderness Watch, Yaak Forest Council, Paul Seiracki, Selkirk Conservation Alliance, Kootenai Environmental Alliance, Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Wolverines remain one of North America's most vulnerable carnivores, with an estimated population of only 300 individuals in the contiguous United States. The Big Wild of Idaho supports the largest remaining core population and habitat, making its conservation essential to species recovery.

Friends of the Clearwater and partners propose the Citizens Wolverine Restoration Initiative, a comprehensive effort to secure and restore wolverine populations across Idaho's Big Wild landscape. The initiative will identify and protect core habitat, reduce threats from roads and winter motorized recreation, strengthen connectivity between Idaho and Montana populations, and establish the nation's first large-scale carnivore conservation reserve in the lower 48 states.

As part of the broader Big Wild Wildlife Corridors and Connectivity Initiative, this project will conserve and reconnect one of North America's largest intact ecosystems while supporting wildlife recovery, ecological resilience, and Indigenous stewardship.

BACKGROUND: THE BIG WILD

The area known as the Big Wild is actually two adjacent wild regions. Clearwater Country is a land of moist cedar-fir forests and lower elevation mountains. This is where Friends of the Clearwater has focused its efforts. Salmon River Country is a higher, drier region of ponderosa break lands and glacier-carved peaks. They are joined by the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Our core region, Wild Clearwater Country, contains 3 million acres of wilderness and roadless forest.

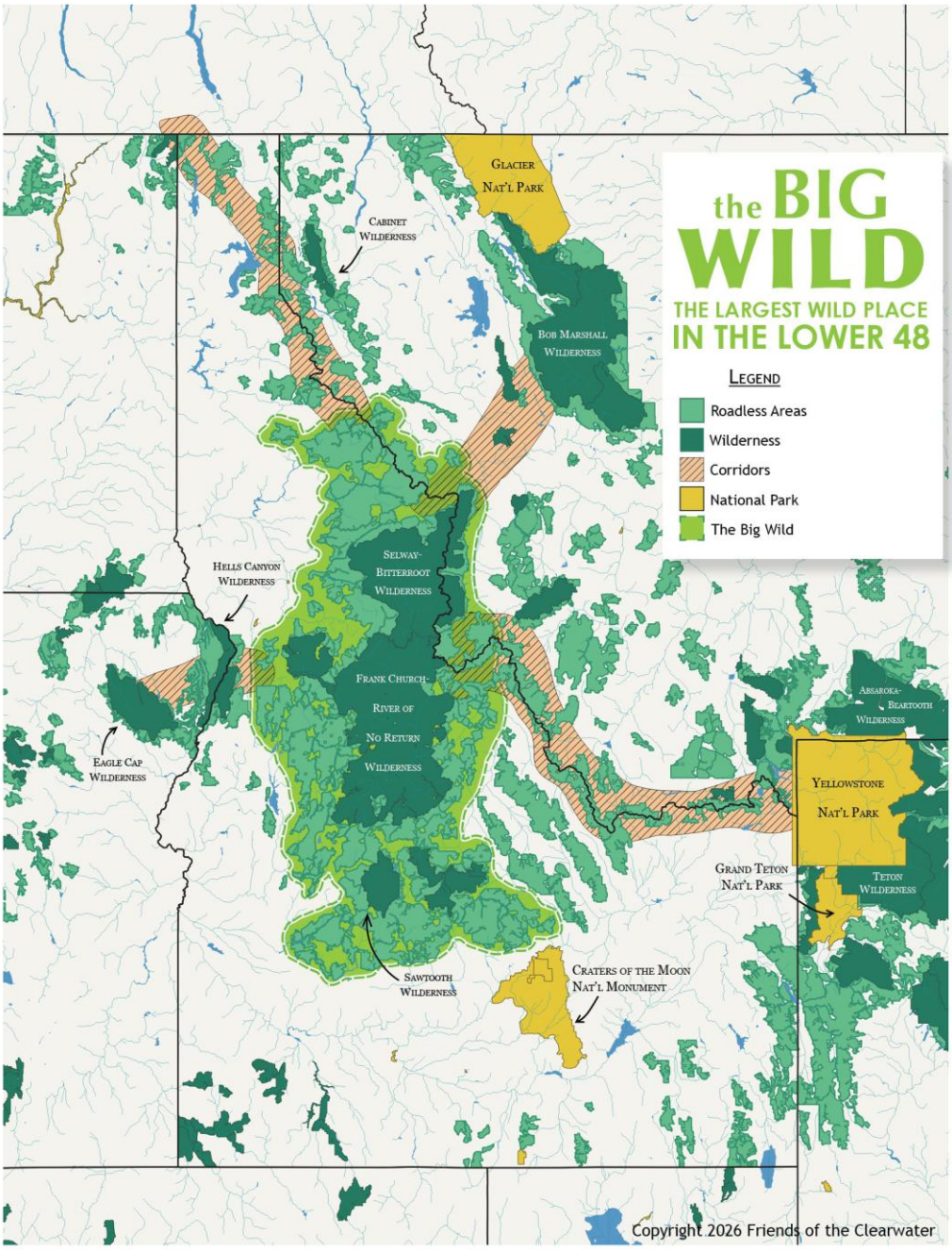
Altogether, the Big Wild covers more than 10 million contiguous acres of wild, undeveloped country, making it larger than Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks combined. This unique and irreplaceable region, jointly owned by all of us, is rich in biodiversity. Friends of the Clearwater will secure the largest intact wildland preserve in the contiguous United States for biodiversity

and climate health with 3 Initiatives: I. Wild Salmon Sanctuary, **II. Carnivore Corridors**, III. Forest and Climate.

The Big Wild has been central to Friends of the Clearwater's mission since 1987, and a core focus of the proposed legislation, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA). https://allianceforthewildrockies.org/nrepa/

The Big Wild connects to major wildland complexes, including:

- Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (east)
- Glacier Park and Bob Marshall ecosystems (northeast)
- Hells Canyon and Wallowa Mountains (west)
- Selkirk, Cabinet-Yaak, (north)



THE BIG WILD

INITIATIVE II – WILDLIFE CORRIDORS AND CONNECTIVITY

We will secure the largest, most intact, most abundant and most diverse carnivore preserve in the nation, thereby ensuring the greatest possible diversity of other species as well.

To create and maintain carnivore connectivity across The Big Wild, FOC will work to:

- Protect all Identified Roadless Areas;
- Expand and enhance protections and systems to create protected north/south and east/west travel corridors for threatened and endangered carnivores;
- Enhance carnivore survival by increasing coexistence
- Inventory and map threatened and endangered carnivores to help prioritize our efforts;
- Partner with other organizations across both the Clearwater and Salmon Country to advocate for any or all ESA-listed mammals that (will) use these corridors.

NEED FOR ACTION

Wolverines were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2023. An estimated 300 animals remain in the lower 48 states. Idaho contains the largest concentration of occupied habitat with approximately 120 animals. Recovery of the species cannot be achieved without securing Idaho's core populations and improving connectivity to neighboring populations in Montana.

Current conservation efforts are insufficient to ensure recovery. Habitat effectiveness continues to decline due to:

- Expanding road networks and motorized access
- Winter recreation in sensitive habitat
- Habitat fragmentation
- Climate-driven reductions in suitable habitat
- Weakening of wildlife and public-land protections (Roadless Rule, ESA evisceration)
- Additional species that would benefit from these conservation actions include grizzly bear, Canada lynx, fisher, whitebark pine, salmon, steelhead, and bull trout.

VISION

The Citizens Wolverine Restoration Initiative will create a coordinated, science-based and community-supported framework for restoring wolverines throughout Idaho and strengthening recovery across the Northern Rockies. The initiative will:

- Secure and enhance core wolverine habitat
- Protect roadless areas critical to long-term recovery
- Reduce impacts from roads and winter recreation
- Strengthen landscape connectivity between Idaho and Montana
- Build public awareness and support for wolverine conservation
- Establish the first carnivore-focused conservation reserve in the contiguous United States

THEORY OF CHANGE

Large-scale conservation succeeds when science, public engagement, and partnerships align around a clear vision. Although the Big Wild contains some of the most important wolverine habitat in the United States, public awareness of its significance remains limited.

By combining rigorous scientific assessment, collaborative management, citizen engagement, and strategic advocacy, the initiative will generate support for wolverine recovery and promote durable habitat protections. Demonstrating success in Idaho can serve as a model for carnivore conservation throughout western North America.

Key assumptions include:

- Bold conservation goals inspire public support.
- Local and regional partnerships improve conservation outcomes.
- Citizen engagement strengthens policy and management decisions.
- Connectivity and habitat security are essential to long-term recovery.

GOALS

Long-Term Goals (5-10 Years)

- Recover wolverine populations in Idaho.

- Contribute significantly to recovery throughout the Northern Rockies.
- Establish the first carnivore conservation reserve in the lower 48 states

Short-Term Goals (1-5 Years)

- Secure core wolverine habitat.
- Reduce impacts from roads and winter recreation.
- Maintain and strengthen connectivity between Idaho and Montana populations.
- Build broad public support for wolverine recovery.

Objectives

1. Assess wolverine occupancy across Idaho and adjacent Montana landscapes and identify factors affecting distribution.
2. Evaluate the conservation value of Wilderness Study Areas, roadless areas, and other land designations for habitat security and connectivity.
3. Conduct a Population Viability Analysis to determine recovery requirements and assess the relative importance of survival, reproduction, mortality, and connectivity.
4. Identify and refine priority wildlife corridors and management strategies that enhance landscape connectivity.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

Phase I

The initiative will focus on understanding habitat conditions, reducing threats, and securing key landscapes.

Major actions include:

1. Map overlap between high-quality wolverine habitat and winter recreation use.
2. Develop scenario-planning tools to identify management options that minimize recreation impacts.
3. Identify and evaluate areas where recreation and wolverine use are most likely to overlap.
4. Implement public education and citizen-science programs to increase awareness and monitoring capacity.

5. Monitor federal land-management proposals affecting habitat conditions or access.
6. Protect roadless areas and core habitat in the Clearwater region.
7. Expand protection efforts throughout the broader Big Wild landscape in collaboration with partners.
8. Strengthen habitat connectivity between Idaho and Montana populations. The initiative will complement related Big Wild projects focused on wildlife corridors, native fish conservation, habitat restoration, and landscape connectivity.

Phase I Deliverables

- Spatial model identifying overlap between important wolverine habitat and recreation activity.
- Analysis of existing winter recreation restrictions and future management opportunities.
- Draft maps identifying priority habitat and connectivity areas in Idaho and Montana.
- Recommendations for conservation actions and monitoring priorities.

Expected Outcomes

By the completion of Phase I, the initiative will deliver:

- Improved understanding of habitat conditions and threats.
- Science-based recommendations for habitat protection and recovery.
- Enhanced conservation planning across Idaho and Montana.
- Increased public engagement in wolverine recovery.
- Improved habitat security and connectivity for wolverines and other focal species.
- A foundation for long-term recovery and establishment of a carnivore conservation reserve.

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY

For nearly four decades, Friends of the Clearwater has worked to protect the wildlands and wildlife of Idaho's Clearwater Basin. The organization has successfully defended approximately 1.5 million acres of roadless landscapes and helped secure protections benefiting wolves, grizzly bears, lynx, wolverines, native fish, and other species.

This experience positions Friends of the Clearwater and its partners to lead a landscape-scale conservation initiative focused on wolverine recovery and ecosystem connectivity.

EXPANDED PARTNERSHIPS

The initiative will be implemented through collaboration with Tribal governments, conservation organizations, academic institutions, citizen-science networks, and public agencies. Strategic partnerships will support research, monitoring, habitat protection, public outreach, and policy advocacy.

CALL TO ACTION

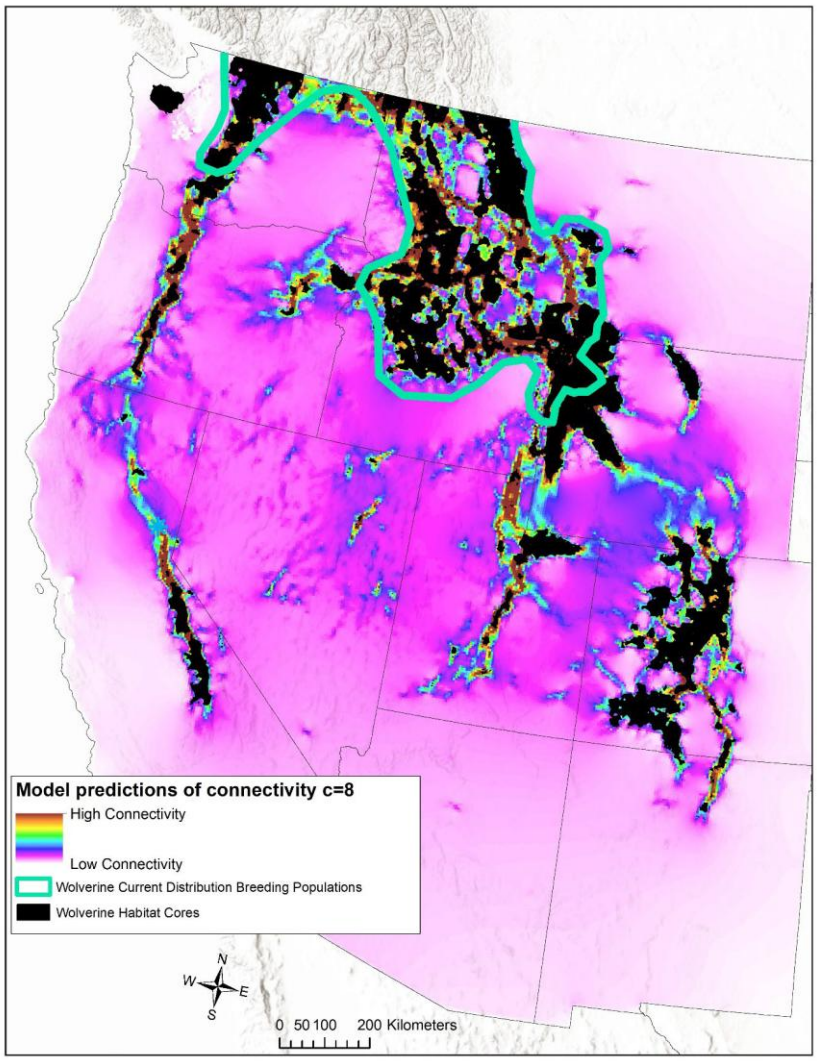
The Big Wild is one of the most significant remaining strongholds for wolverines in North America. Protecting and reconnecting this landscape is essential not only for wolverine recovery but also for maintaining ecological resilience, wildlife movement, and healthy watersheds throughout the Northern Rockies. We invite funders, partners, and members of the public to join us in securing a future for wolverines and the extraordinary landscapes on which they depend.

For more information:

Friends of the Clearwater
foc@friendsoftheclearwater.org

Figures.

Current Wolverine Habitat and Connectivity (need hot link)


Model predictions of connectivity c=8
High Connectivity
Low Connectivity
Wolverine Current Distribution Breeding Populations
Wolverine Habitat Cores
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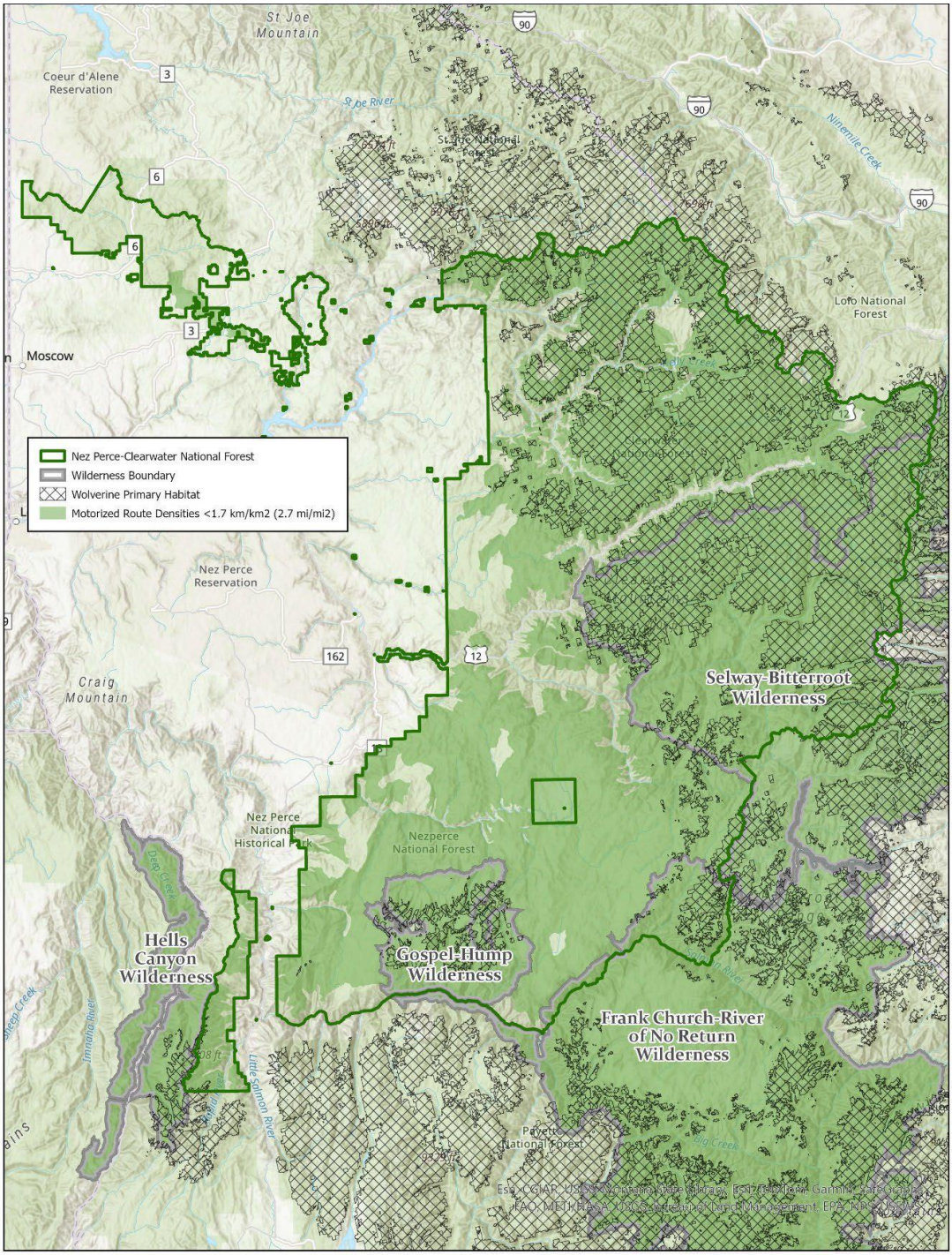
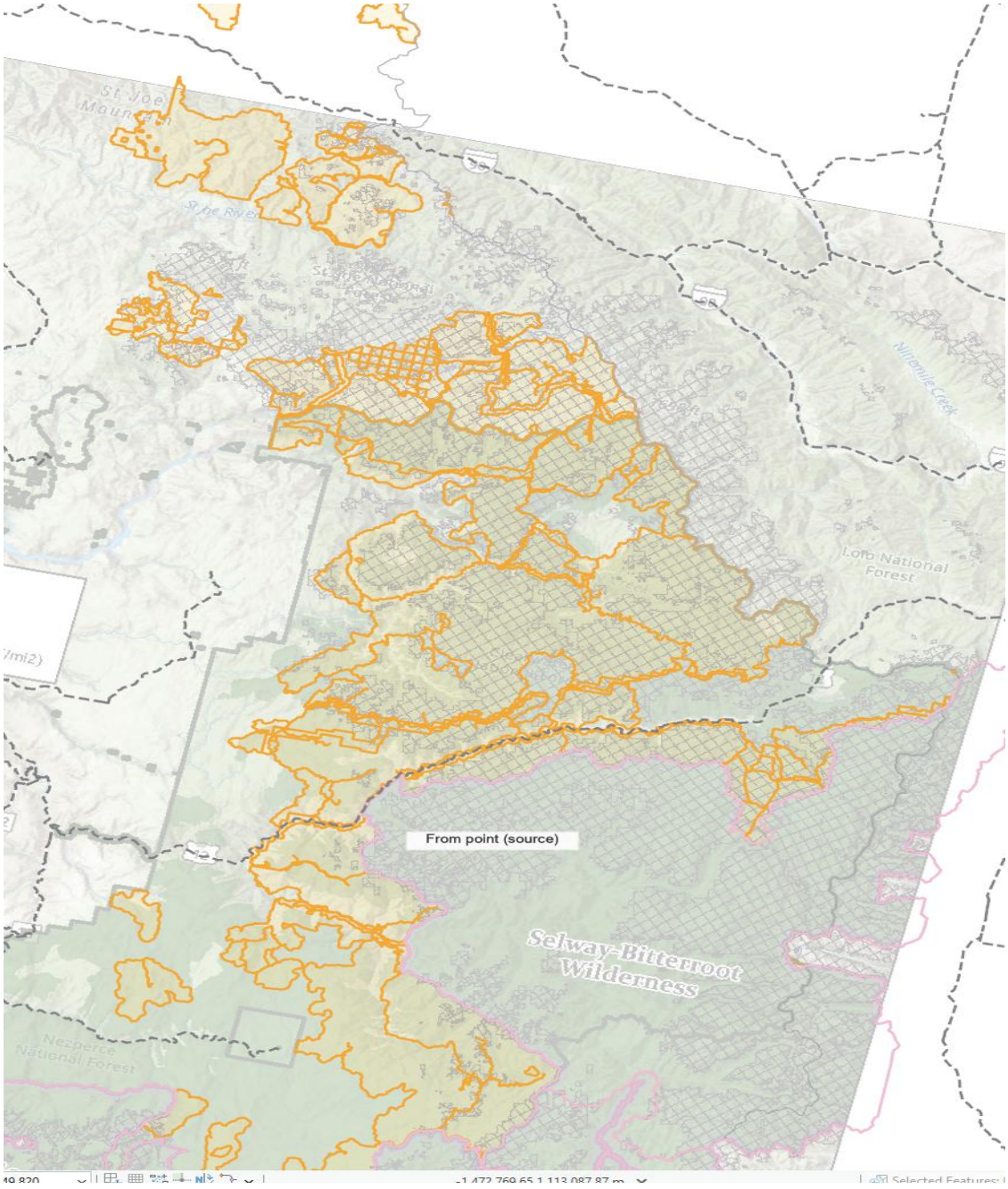
0 50 100 200 Kilometers



https://www.fs.usda.gov/sites/nfs/files/legacy-media/nezperce-clearwater/2025LMP_app1_015WinterROS.pdf

2024-5 Roadless area over primary wolverine habitat


From point (source)
Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness
Lolo National Forest
Nezperce National Forest

WOLVERINE CONSERVATION PROJECT BUDGET

Activity	Estimated Budget ($)
GIS habitat mapping, recreation access and logging project overlays	5,000
Scenario mapping to reduce recreation impacts	10,000
Critical habitat map development	5,000
Winter habitat use assessment via flights	5,000
Citizen science monitoring program	10,000
Expand Forest Watch to Payette	10,000
Coordinate monitoring of proposed forest projects	5,000
Population Viability Analysis (PVA)	10,000
Outreach campaign materials	10,000
Partnerships, outreach, and citizen engagement	20,000
Wolverine observation incentive program	5,000
Website support and watershed-level location reporting (Wolverinewatch)	5,000
Camera trapping collaborations with partners across the region	10,000
Lolo-to-Lookout connectivity assessment	15,000
High Divide connectivity assessment	10,000
Nez Perce collaboration, monitoring, and reporting	20,000
Roadless area protection and Forest Watch activities	20,000
“Adopt a Wolverine” program	5,000
Idaho Wolverine Community Lead (monitoring and outreach on OSV closure proposals)	20,000
Estimated Total	**$215,000**