

*DRAFT – DO NOT DISTRIBUTE*

## **FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER**

*PROTECTING WILD CLEARWATER COUNTRY SINCE 1987*

# **Restoring Grizzly Bears**

to central Idaho, the Grizzly Bear Promised Land

Big Wild Initiative II – Wildlife Corridors and Connectivity  
October, 2026



A grizzly bear photographed on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests in 2019 at a bear bait. This is one of the few grizzly bears to have reached Idaho's Big Wild. USFWS image.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grizzly bears remain scarce in the Bitterroot Recovery Zone despite decades of recovery planning. Dispersing grizzlies from the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and from the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem create a unique opportunity to restore healthy populations into the Bitterroot Ecosystem of the Big Wild. The Citizens Idaho Grizzly Restoration Initiative will support monitoring, conflict-prevention, corridor conservation, and tribal partnerships to welcome grizzly bears back to the Big Wild landscape. Over five years, the initiative aims to document occupancy by family groups, reduce human-caused mortality, and strengthen ecological connectivity between Montana and Idaho.

This corridor initiative is one of a series that aims to conserve and reconnect one of the largest intact ecosystems in North America, supporting imperiled species, restoring ecological function, and honoring Indigenous and historical use of the landscape.

## BACKGROUND: THE BIG WILD

The area known as the Big Wild is actually two adjacent wild regions. The Wild Clearwater Country is a land of dense and diverse ~~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 three Initiatives: I. Wild Salmon Sanctuary, II. **Carnivore Corridors**, III. Forest and Climate.

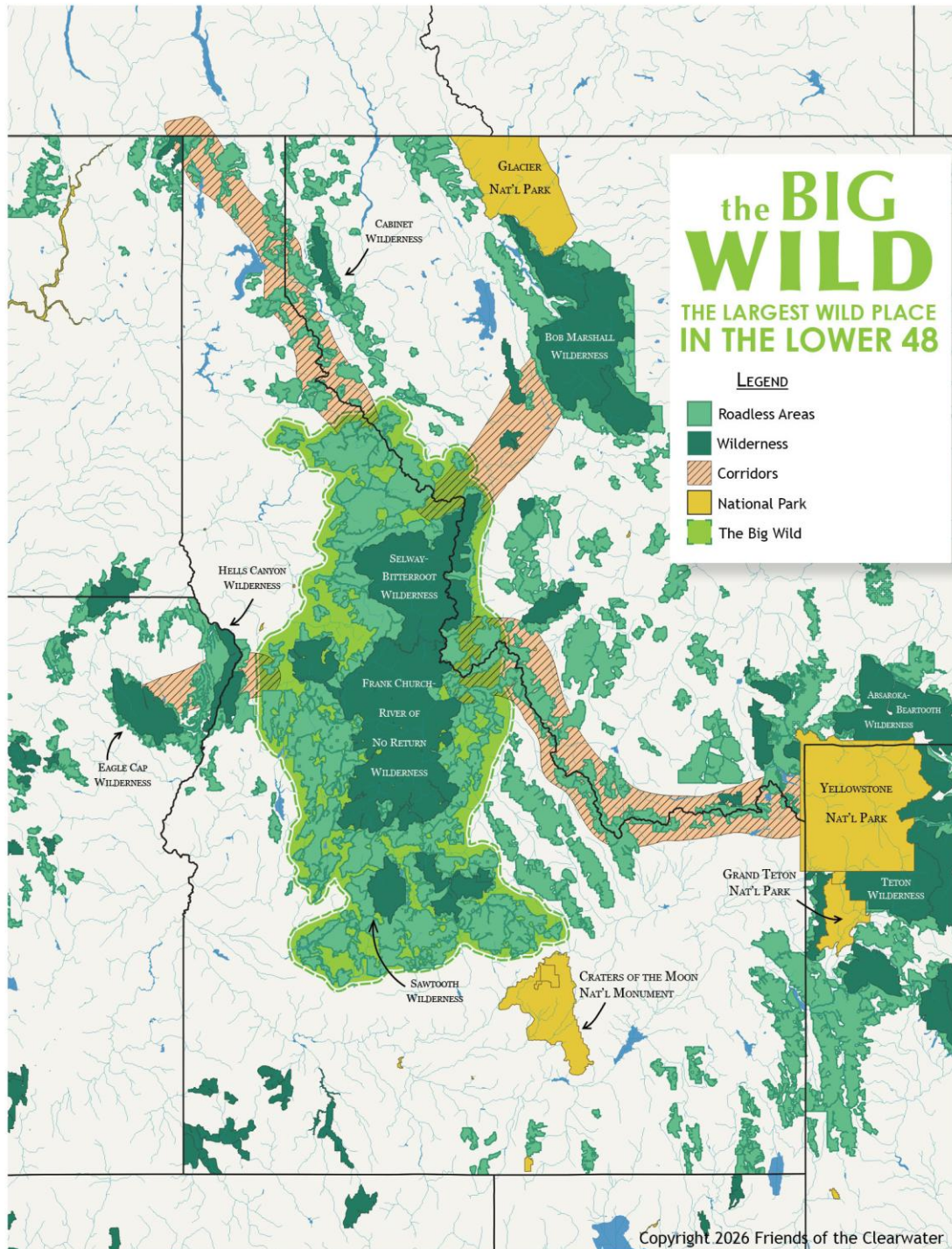
The Big Wild has been central to Friends of the Clearwater's mission since 1987, and a core focus of the proposed legislation, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA).

<https://allianceforthewildrockies.org/nrepa/>

The Big Wild connects to major wildland complexes, including:

- Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (east)
- Northern Continental Divide (northeast)
- Hells Canyon and Wallowa Mountains (west)
- Selkirk-Cabinet-Yaak (north)

## BIG WILD MAP



*The Big Wild provides the best unoccupied grizzly bear habitat in North America. Its geographical location between the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystems is critical to genetic interchange between grizzly bear populations.*

*Map by Paul Busch/Friends of the Clearwater.*

## 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 rare wildlife species that (will) use these corridors.

## PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Grizzly bear recovery is at a pivotal moment. Populations in the Greater Yellowstone and Northern Continental Divide ecosystems continue to disperse, and ~~ranging~~ bears are increasingly occupying new portions of Montana. However, human-caused mortality, habitat fragmentation, and inadequate monitoring continue to limit successful recolonization of Idaho's Bitterroot ecosystem. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has concluded that recovery in the Bitterroot Ecosystem is unlikely under current conservation efforts, highlighting the need for proactive action.

The Citizens Idaho Grizzly Restoration Initiative seeks to accelerate and ensure natural grizzly recolonization of the Bitterroot Recovery Area (Figure 1) by increasing survival of dispersing bears, strengthening habitat connectivity, and building public support for coexistence. Led by Friends of the Clearwater in partnership with the Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment and regional conservation organizations, the initiative will focus on the critical connectivity corridor linking western Montana populations to the Bitterroot Recovery Area. We are proposing to work with our partners to implement many of the actions recommended in the cooperative document: [A New Vision for Grizzly Bear Recovery in the Northern Rocky Mountains](#).

Key project activities include:

- Expanding nonlethal conflict-prevention and coexistence programs in priority connectivity zones.
- Support monitoring grizzly occurrence through camera trapping, hair-snag surveys, and citizen reporting networks.
- Identifying and conserving critical wildlife corridors, including the Lochsa-Lolo and Lolo-to-Lookout landscapes.
- Supporting cooperative stewardship and conservation planning with regional partners.
- Increasing public awareness and engagement through outreach, education, and citizen science programs.

Over the next five years, the initiative aims to document increasing grizzly occupancy in Idaho, support the establishment of grizzly bears with cubs within the Bitterroot ecosystem, reduce human-caused mortality in key movement corridors, and strengthen landscape connectivity for a broad suite of wildlife species. By combining science-based monitoring, coexistence strategies, and cooperative conservation, the Citizens Idaho Grizzly Restoration Initiative offers a practical pathway toward restoring grizzly bears to one of their most important remaining recovery landscapes while enhancing the ecological resilience of the greater Big Wild region

Additional at-risk species that will benefit from these actions include:

- ESA-listed: lynx, wolverine, whitebark pine
- Species of concern: fisher
- Threatened fish: salmon, steelhead, bull trout

## THEORY OF CHANGE

Grizzly recovery depends on reducing human-caused mortality, maintaining habitat connectivity, and fostering public support for coexistence. Proven nonlethal conflict-prevention measures have contributed to the successful expansion of grizzly populations across the Northern Rockies.

To facilitate natural recolonization of Idaho's Bitterroot Recovery Area, these proven strategies must be expanded into key connectivity zones between Montana and Idaho. By reducing conflicts and increasing survival of dispersing bears, we can improve the likelihood of establishing a self-sustaining grizzly population in the Bitterroot Ecosystem.

Public awareness of both the Big Wild landscape and Idaho's grizzly recovery opportunity remains limited. The Citizens Idaho Grizzly Restoration Initiative will build public engagement, strengthen partnerships, and generate support for long-term grizzly conservation and recovery.

This initiative seeks to restore ecological function and wildlife abundance. Through science-based conservation, cooperation, and coexistence, we can reconnect landscapes, recover native species, and create a more resilient future for the Big Wild and its wildlife.

## GOALS

*Long term (10 -20 years):* Recover grizzlies in Idaho and thereby the Northern Rockies

*Short term (1-5 years):*

- Ensure that grizzlies in the expanding vanguard remain alive
- Ensure that grizzlies have corridors to disperse through and areas of home range connectivity to maintain viable populations genetic interchange.
- Document occupancy in the Bitterroot Recovery Zone including >1 family group

### ***Idaho Grizzly Recovery and Coexistence Budget (Estimated)***

| Category                         | Activity                                                       | Budget (\$) |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Outreach & Engagement            | Outreach campaign materials                                    | 10,000      |
|                                  | Partnership building, outreach, citizen engagement, travel     | 20,000      |
|                                  | Website support for watershed-level grizzly location reporting | 5,000       |
|                                  | "Adopt a Grizzly" public engagement program                    | 5,000       |
| Subtotal – Outreach & Engagement |                                                                | 40,000      |

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GRIZZLY BEAR INITIATIVE

|                                                     |                                                                                                                                                        |        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| Partnerships & Tribal Collaboration                 | Develop partnership framework with the Nez Perce Tribe                                                                                                 | 40,000 |
|                                                     | Collaboration with Nez Perce Tribe on protection, monitoring, and management across treaty lands, and traditional homeland                             | 20,000 |
| Subtotal – Partnerships & Tribal Collaboration      |                                                                                                                                                        | 60,000 |
| Monitoring & Research                               | Provide support for monitoring of sightings (camera traps, hair snares, travel, personnel time)                                                        | 20,000 |
|                                                     | Financial incentives for verified grizzly reports (\$500 × 10 records)                                                                                 | 5,000  |
|                                                     | Provide support for proactive monitoring and camera-trapping cooperatives (Great Burn, Selway-Bitterroot-Frank Church Foundation, University of Idaho) | 10,000 |
|                                                     | Assess and map Lolo-to-Lookout connectivity region                                                                                                     | 15,000 |
|                                                     | Assess and map High Divide connectivity region                                                                                                         | 10,000 |
| Subtotal – Monitoring & Research                    |                                                                                                                                                        | 60,000 |
| Conflict Prevention & Community Programs            | Support and expand Bear Smart Communities programs                                                                                                     | 10,000 |
|                                                     | Idaho conflict/coexistence staff position                                                                                                              | 40,000 |
| Subtotal – Conflict Prevention & Community Programs |                                                                                                                                                        | 50,000 |
| Conservation & Policy                               | Roadless area protection and forest watch activities                                                                                                   | 20,000 |
|                                                     | Assessment of Idaho wolf bounty program and potential actions/litigation as it pertains to harm for grizzly bears                                      | 5,000  |

## FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER

## GRIZZLY BEAR INITIATIVE

|                                  |                                                                              |        |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
|                                  | Amicus brief regarding federal killing of wolves and grizzlies in wilderness | 5,000  |
| Subtotal – Conservation & Policy |                                                                              | 30,000 |
|                                  |                                                                              |        |

***Budget Summary***

| Program Area                             | Amount (\$) |
|------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Outreach & Engagement                    | 40,000      |
| Partnerships & Tribal Collaboration      | 60,000      |
| Monitoring & Research                    | 60,000      |
| Conflict Prevention & Community Programs | 50,000      |
| Conservation & Policy                    | 30,000      |
| Total Budget                             | 240,000     |

## EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- Grizzly occupancy in Idaho including family groups in < 5 years
- No losses of grizzlies in expanding front and seam
- Significantly Improved connectivity for carnivores and other species
- Enhanced recognition of the Nez Perce Tribe (Nimiipuu) cultural history and recent extensive ecosystem recovery efforts

## PARTNERSHIPS

We will work with conservation partners in the corridor including Friends of the Bitterroot, Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment, Selkirk Cabinet Yaak Wildlands Alliance, Bitterroot Bear, Salish Kootenai, Swan Coalition, A New Vision for Grizzly Bear Recovery in the Northern Rocky Mountains team, and many others.

## CALL TO ACTION

The Big Wild is a landscape of ecological, cultural, and national significance. Immediate action is needed to secure its future. We invite partners, funders, and the public to join in protecting this vital corridor—ensuring healthy ecosystems, clean water, and thriving wildlife for generations to come.

For more information or to get involved, contact:

**Friends of the Clearwater** – [foc@friendsoftheclearwater.org](mailto:foc@friendsoftheclearwater.org)

**Figure 1. Recovery Zones and Estimate Occupied Range from US Fish and Wildlife Service Grizzly Bear Recover Office 2026.**



Species List Areas (or "may be present" map) help federal agencies determine where effects to listed species should be considered for consultation from actions they carry out, fund, or permit to meet requirements under Section 7(a) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). As grizzly bears expand their range, the SLA is intended to be spatially inclusive of all areas that meet the "may be present" methodology for grizzly bears. The "may be present" methodology is derived from current estimated occupied range and verified location data outside of current distributions; not all areas that are designated as "may be present" meet the criteria to be included in estimated occupied range. Local evaluation is needed by federal Level 1 ESA Streamlining Teams to determine potential effects of agency actions where grizzly bears "may be present." Identifying locations where grizzly bears "may be present" will facilitate project planning activities that promote grizzly bear conservation and recovery. The grizzly bear SLA is updated with any new verified sightings every 90 days. Although we receive sighting information throughout the year, there can be a lag between receipt of the information, verification of grizzly bear, and updating the map. To provide the most up-to-date information for Section 7 consultation pending those updates, we will notify the relevant federal agency personnel when any new HUCs are added. We will continue to supply an updated verified map to all partners through PAC. Last updated February 2, 2026 with data from Feb 2, 2016 to February 2, 2026.

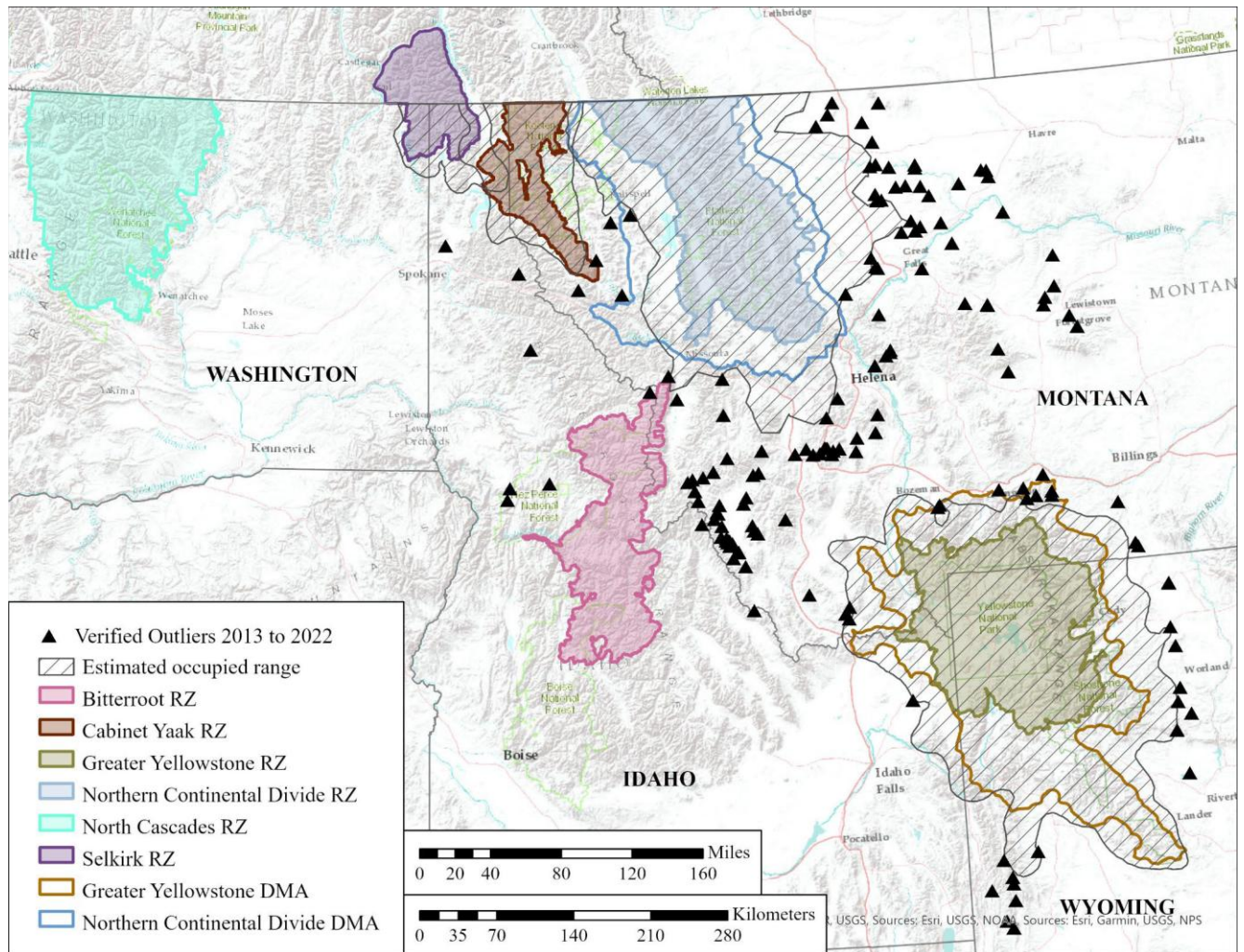
**Figure 2. Verified Bear Occurrences Outside of Estimated Occupied Range, 2013-2022- USGS**

**Figure 3. Grizzly Bear Recovery Depends on Roadless Area Protections – Sells et al 2023**

