

# Federal study criticized by McCain as pork spending finds grizzly bears thriving in Montana

By DINA CAPIELLO | Associated Press Writer

8:00 PM CDT, September 16, 2008

WASHINGTON (AP) — The majestic grizzly bear, once king of the Western wilderness but threatened with extinction for a third of a century, has roared back in Montana. The finding, from a \$4.8 million, five-year study of grizzly bear DNA mocked by Republican presidential candidate John McCain as pork barrel spending, could help ease restrictions on oil and gas drilling, logging and other development.

Researchers with the U.S. Geological Survey announced Tuesday that there are approximately 765 bears in northwestern Montana. That's the largest population of grizzly bears documented there in more than 30 years, and a sign that the species could be at long last recovering. The first-ever scientific census shattered earlier estimates that said there were at least 250-350 bears roaming an eight-million-acre area stretching from north of Missoula to the Canadian border. More recent data placed the minimum population at around 563 bears. **"This is two and a half times the number of bears previously estimated," said Katherine Kendall, the lead researcher, who said the results speak for themselves.** There is no evidence that the population size was ever severely reduced..."

**In a February 2003 floor speech, McCain poked fun at the project,** describing a scenario where the DNA would be used to help a bear cub find its father, or pin down which bear stole hikers' food. "I don't know if it was a paternity issue or criminal, but it was a waste of money," McCain said in a stump speech earlier this year, **erroneously putting the cost of the study at \$3 million.** In a campaign ad, he called the expenditure "unbelievable."

**Supporters of the research included Montana ranchers, farmers and Republican leaders.** They pushed for the study as a step toward taking the grizzly bear off the endangered species list. Since 1975, the bear has been threatened in the lower 48 states, a status that bars hunting and restricts development that can diminish its population. Last year, after more than 30 years of research, the grizzly bear population around Yellowstone National Park was deemed recovered.

"Let's make this an Endangered Species Act success ... get them off the list so we can manage them here in Montana," said John Youngberg, vice president of government affairs for the Montana Farm Bureau, who said that farmers who mistakenly shoot grizzly bears or do so to protect their land face \$25,000 fines under current regulations. His explanation for McCain's comments was that it was "silly season."

The McCain campaign did not return requests for comment.

Former Montana Gov. Judy Martz, a Republican and a McCain supporter, said the bear had been used to block the use of the state's abundant natural resources, when all along the animal was plentiful. She asked former Republican Sen. Conrad Burns to help secure the funding, which was paid for in part by add-ons and a \$1.1 million earmark for the Forest Service in 2004. Burns is the McCain campaign's chairman in Montana. "If it is going to remove it from the list, it is money well spent," said Martz. When asked about McCain's stance, Martz said "unless you live among these issues it is pretty hard to understand what is going on."

The study employed more than 200 field workers. Over 14 weeks in 2004 they collected hair samples from 2,500 barbed-wire hair traps and 4,800 trees that bears naturally rub against to scratch themselves. A mixture of pureed fish guts and cattle blood that was aged in one hundred 55-gallon steel drums in a rented barn for more than a year before the study began lured bears to the sampling stations. Altogether 34,000 hair samples were analyzed — a number that so overwhelmed the company conducting the DNA tests that it had to buy an additional building and double its staff to handle the project.

**The result was the most accurate and precise census of a bear population to date, bear experts said. Researchers also found evidence that the population has been growing in size and expanding its range. Its diversity resembled that of grizzly bear populations in pristine habitats.**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is in charge of regulating endangered species, is currently reviewing the bears' status in Montana as part of a five-year review required by the Endangered Species Act. The study's results will be a key piece of evidence used by biologists to determine whether the bear still needs federal protection, a conclusion due out early next year.

But bear experts — and environmentalists — cautioned it will take more than a population count to fully recover the species. Further research into population trends and the bear's habitat will also be needed. "All the things people have been doing are making a difference," said Chris Servheen, the service's Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator. This gives us some feedback that the bears are doing really well. This was an investment in the recovery of an icon of the American West, which is the grizzly bear."