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Agency directors provide update on predator populations and ‘significant’ fire season

Natural Resources Committee reviews grizzly bear and wolf numbers, as well as look back at fire season

BOISE — Natural resource agency directors went before legislators on the Natural Resources Committee on Tuesday, detailing trends in grizzly bear and wolf populations in Idaho and providing an update as the state’s fire season enters its closing weeks.

Grizzly bear and wolf populations

Director of the Idaho Department of Fish and Game Jim Fredericks went before legislators to provide an update on a pair of predator populations in the state. A key moving piece at the federal level is around grizzly bear management, which could be retooled under a proposed revision to a section of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), known as section 4(d).

Still to be finalized, Fredericks addressed the proposed rule change Tuesday and said it can be understood as providing “more latitude” to respond to depredations in the state. In practice, Fredericks said the updated rule would allow livestock producers to manage depredations on their own or allow the state to act on a producer’s behalf, rather than needing to go to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife for approval to euthanize.

According to U.S. Wildlife Services investigator data from Jan. 1 to Sept. 30, there have been 31 investigations resulting in 24 confirmed, probable or possible depredations that included six cattle and 29 sheep lost in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem in eastern Idaho.

He added it would be “far short of a delisting rule,” referring to the grizzly bear’s current listing as a threatened species under the ESA, a classification that comes with certain protections against “take” which includes harassing, harming, hunting, wounding or killing wildlife.

Though Karen Budd-Falen, the U.S. Department of the Interior associate deputy secretary, made a similar characterization of the rule during a Federalism Committee last month, she told legislators to “treat it like it’s going to be delisted.”

She also told legislators the federal agency was looking to provide Idaho the opportunity to create its own recovery plan for the grizzly bear population. This plan would provide a framework for how grizzly population numbers could be improved to move away from its threatened status and allow for a push to delist.

Fredericks contested the idea that the state did not already have such a management plan, however, and said IDFG already has conservation strategies signed by several state and federal wildlife agencies, along with recently updated plans for Eastern Idaho as well as a conservation strategy for North Idaho “in the process of being finalized.”

“Anything with regard to moving forward with delisting is not being held up by Idaho,” Fredericks said.

Turning to trends on the status of the wolf population in the state, Fredericks said that as of May 2025 there were 1,129 wolves, down from a prior estimate of 1,235 wolves in 2024 and well above the agency’s target of maintaining around 500 animals in the state.

From the 2021 harvest year onward, wolf mortalities have ranged between 283 and 487. In order to continually decrease the population size over time, Fredericks said the wolf mortality rate would need to be about 30% annually. Though there were initial concerns a federal trapping injunction would give rise to an increase in the wolf population in the state, Fredericks said the absence of an increase “suggests that we are maintaining around that 30% mortality rate.”

Fire season update

Idaho Department of Lands Director Dustin Miller described the 2026 fire season as “significant” on the national level. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, as of Oct. 9 there have been approximately 63,700 fires and more than 9 million acres burned, the latter of which is equivalent to about 145% of the 10-year average for this point in the year.

Miller noted national preparedness levels peaked at level 5, the highest on the scale, for 48 consecutive days during the fire season.

According to NIFC, this level is indicative of fire resources across the country being heavily committed, making it difficult to “secure firefighters, engines, aircraft and incident management teams,” Miller said. This demand for resources has since declined, however,

and as of Oct. 9, preparedness levels sit at level 2, reflecting reduced demand for national firefighting resources.

Heading into this year's fire season, Idaho was characterized by record-low snowpack levels as well as persistent and widespread drought.

As of the end of September, Miller said 10,000 acres had burned across land under IDL's protection, with suppression costs to the state exceeding $47 million, approximately $19.8 million of which is reimbursable for being outside of IDL protection areas. Excluding those costs, fire suppression costs have netted $27.5 million for the state.

Looking at the fires under IDL's protection, Miller said 80% have been human-caused, matching the percentage recorded in 2020. Over the previous six years, human-caused fires have generally exceeded 60% outside of a low-point of 46% human-caused fires in 2022, according to IDL data.

Miller said the department is able to see that costs are recuperated when fires have been determined to be the result of negligence, but said "workload issue(s)" contributed to these proceedings taking "a few years or longer to collect." Even when these proceedings are successful, Miller said the recuperated costs still tended to be below the actual damages.

Rep. Britt Raybould, R-Rexburg, questioned whether the department could explore taking away hunting or trailer licenses as a means of further deterring activities that may contribute to new fire starts.

This proposed consequence aligns with a policy put in place by the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare in 2024, where hunting and fishing licenses are suspended for non-custodial parents who are past-due on child support payments. As for whether IDL would consider a similar policy, Miller said he was "happy to have that conversation."

Looking at individual fires, the Big Grass fire on the Idaho-Oregon border proved to be among the biggest draws on resources this fire season and burned over 578,000 acres before full containment was achieved last month. The scale and rapid growth of the fire prompted Gov. Brad Little to authorize National Guard deployment in July to fight the blaze as it extended into Owyhee County.

Miller said the National Guard response to the fire included allocating two Black Hawk helicopters for "bucket work" as well as a medevac helicopter that specializes in patient transport.

Though the state is now transitioning into fall weather and cooler temperatures, drought conditions remain. According to data from the U.S. Drought Monitor released earlier this month, 67.6% of the state is between a moderate and exceptional drought level. Between

the months of January and August, Miller said it was the 18th driest on record for the state, with precipitation “about 3.23 inches below normal.”

“These conditions matter because dry fuels can remain receptive to fire even as temperatures decline,” Miller said, adding “wind and low humidity can still produce rapid fire spread, particularly in grasses and brush.”

Miller said fire burn restrictions were still on track to lift by Oct. 20, which stands as end date for the closed fire season. During this window, which begins on May 10, residents need a burn permit for state and private lands.

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