

HOUSE BILL REPORT

SJM 8004

As Reported by House Committee On:
Fisheries, Ecology & Parks

Brief Description: Requesting that British Columbia refrain from releasing grizzly bears near our common border.

Sponsors: Senators Morton, Haugen, Hargrove and T. Sheldon.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Fisheries, Ecology & Parks: 3/27/03, 3/28/03 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Requests the political leaders of British Columbia to refrain from releasing Grizzly Bears in locations where the bears range may extend into Washington.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, ECOLOGY & PARKS

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 8 members: Representatives Cooper, Chair; Berkey, Vice Chair; Sump, Ranking Minority Member; Hinkle, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Buck, Hatfield, O'Brien and Pearson.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 1 member: Representative Upthegrove.

Staff: Jason Callahan (786-7117).

Background:

The Grizzly Bear is considered to be a threatened species on both the federal and state species list in the United States. In British Columbia, the Grizzly Bear has a provincial status of special concern.

According to the British Columbia Ministry of Water, Land, and Air Protection (Ministry), the province of British Columbia is implementing a Grizzly Bear recovery plan for the North Cascades region of the province. This region of British Columbia, which borders the northern Washington line, is reported by the Ministry to have a Grizzly Bear population of less than 25 individuals, with transportation corridors blocking

migration from adjacent populations. The proposed recovery plan developed by the Ministry attempts to recover the population in both the long and short term. One of the short-term approaches of the recovery plan is the introduction of individual bears from neighboring regions of the province into the North Cascade region.

In Washington, the Legislature has directed the Department of Fish and Wildlife (DFW) to protect Grizzly Bears and to develop management programs on public lands to promote natural population regeneration. Although the DFW is directed to participate in federal Grizzly Bear management discussions, the introduction of Grizzly Bears into Washington is expressly prohibited.

Summary of Bill:

British Columbia's Premier and Minister of Land, Water, and Air Protection, and the British Columbia Legislative Assembly, is asked by the Washington Legislature to refrain from releasing Grizzly Bears in locations where the bears range may extend into Washington. If bear release is deemed necessary by British Columbia, the province is asked to obtain and share DNA samples from each released bear, and implant each bear with a microchip containing specific information about that individual bear.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not Requested.

Testimony For: The value of maintaining Washington's native Grizzly Bear population needs to be recognized, but the Legislature has already made clear that Washington does not want to have any new bears brought into the state. Some United States-based conservation groups offered funding to British Columbia to release bears close to the border so that they can migrate into Washington. The current Washington Grizzly Bear population is strong, and does not need to be augmented, especially in areas that are popular for outdoor recreation and near growing population centers.

If the bears come into Washington, it is unlikely that there will be enough natural food to support a viable population. As a result, the bears will have to feed on livestock and orchards, adding to the problems faced by farmers and ranchers. The introduced bears will also affect Washington's native black bear populations.

British Columbia should be informed that we do not want to have the bears that close to our border.

Testimony Against: The recovery plan that British Columbia is undertaking is entirely funded by the provincial government and United States conservation groups have not

contributed financially. Bear augmentation is only one aspect of the recovery plan, and is only a pilot project. Canada is spending a lot of money to rebuild their bear population, and will make sure that the individuals do not permanently establish in Washington. The British Columbia government should be addressed with respect and understanding, and the DFW has been working closely with the provincial government.

There are few documented Grizzly Bear-human interactions, and even fewer fatalities. Grizzly Bears are very predictable, and can coexist with people. Much of the opposition to Grizzly Bears is based on fear and misinformation. The North Cascades can provide plenty of natural food to sustain a Grizzly Bear population.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service has opined that Grizzly Bears should be listed as endangered, and the threatened populations cannot adequately rebuild without immediate intervention and augmentation.

Testified: (In support) Senator Morton, prime sponsor.

(Opposed) Charles Robbins, Washington State University, Bear Research Program; Sharon Roy Whatcom County Council; Chris Morgan, Insight Wildlife Management and Grizzly Bear Outreach Project; and Joe Scott, Northwest Ecosystem Alliance

(Neutral) Bill Gaines, United States Forest Service; and Steve Pozzanghera, Department of Fish and Wildlife.