

Grizzlies the ultimate test for bear-resistant products

By [NICK GEVOCK](#), Chronicle Staff Writer

WEST YELLOWSTONE -- Kobuk had had enough after pummeling a locked trash can for more than an hour.

The hefty grizzly bear walked away after pushing, prying and standing on the locked trash can in an attempt to get at the stinky tuna fish stashed inside.

His sister, Nakina, then took her turn punishing the can Thursday afternoon at the Grizzly and Wolf Discovery Center.

She didn't get any further than Kobuk.

The can's resilience against such determination drew smiles from Derek Reich and Jay Honeyman, who designed the "UnBearAble" trash can with metal latches.

If the container can withstand 90 minutes of abuse from seasoned veterans of trash-raiding like the center's bears, it's ready for use in the real world, Reich said.

"Compared to what a wild bear would do, this is 1,000 times more intense," he said. "Wild bears don't have the experience of having figured things out before."

But the center's bears have -- over and over again.

For several of them, it was their trash-marauding habits that landed them at the center, which takes in problem bears that would otherwise land in a zoo or be killed.

Every year, the center uses that in-house talent to help manufacturers that specialize in bear-resistant trash cans test their products. This year's event also drew wildlife officials and bear conservationists from throughout the Western United States and Canada who were wrapping up a bear management conference in West Yellowstone.

While the testing is a chance to watch bears beat up garbage cans, which can be entertaining, it also has a serious role.

Last year, for example, wildlife officials had to move 31 bears around Whitefish, said Tim Manley, a bear management specialist with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Thirteen of those bears are no longer in the wild -- they were put in zoos, got hit by trains or had to be killed.

Well-designed trash cans can help prevent that, and the center's bears put them "to the ultimate test," center Director John Heine said.

In order to get a passing grade, a container must last 90 minutes without the bear breaking in. Two models failed miserably on Wednesday; the bears shredded them in about half an hour.

But a solid metal container built by the Colorado Correctional Industries and bolted to a concrete pad in the testing area stood up to the test. Three bears -- Revel, Kobuk and Nakina -- gave up after about 15 minutes.

Dan Veatch of CCI, who has tested here for several years, said the beating the grizzlies delivered was a bit of overkill for his containers, which mostly go to areas with black bears. But it was reassuring.

"If they work here, they'll work out there," he said.

And the manufacturers' observations can lead to further improvements.

With the "UnBearAble" trash can, Kobuk managed to wedge a claw between the lid and a metal band around the top several times, although the container still held up.

"That's what's great about testing here," Reich said. "Even though it passed, we gained valuable information to make it better."