



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

NEWS RELEASE

SNAKE RIVER BASIN OFFICE

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PUBLIC ENCOURAGED TO REVIEW AND COMMENT ON DRAFT RECOVERY PLAN FOR THREATENED NORTHERN IDAHO GROUND SQUIRREL

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has released a draft recovery plan for the northern Idaho ground squirrel (*Spermophilus brunneus brunneus*). Public comment will be accepted until September 13, 2002. The species is found only in western Idaho and was listed as threatened on April 5, 2000 under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

The draft plan calls for protecting and increasing the northern Idaho ground squirrel population, protecting and enhancing its preferred open-meadow habitat, additional field research and a comprehensive monitoring program.

“We are committed to working with the public to begin the process of recovering the rare northern Idaho ground squirrel,” said Bob Ruesink, project leader of the Service’s Snake River Basin Office. “Review and comment on this draft recovery plan will provide helpful insight into possible ways to strengthen our recovery efforts for the species.”

As recently as 1985, biologists estimated there were 5,000 northern Idaho ground squirrels on private lands, lands administered by the State of Idaho and the Payette National Forest in Adams and Valley counties. The squirrel hit a low of 350 individuals in 2000. By 2001 there were an estimated 500 squirrels. Population sites range from 3 acres to 40 acres.

The squirrel has the smallest geographic range of any squirrel species, and one of the smallest ranges among all North American mainland mammals. Its entire range covers an area about 18 miles by 20 miles on public and private lands north of Council, Idaho, although historically the range may have been much larger, extending to Round Valley, near Cascade, Idaho.

The northern Idaho ground squirrel is about 8 inches long. It is dark brown with reddish-brown spots and a dark undercoat. It has a short narrow tail, conspicuous ears, and tan feet. The squirrel lives in dry, rocky meadows surrounded by ponderosa pine or Douglas fir forests at elevations of about 3,800 feet to 5,200 feet. The squirrel is only active for a few months a year, emerging from underground hibernation in late March or early April. It remains active until late July or early August, and then returns to its winter burrow.

The northern Idaho ground squirrel is primarily a grass seed-eater, preferring poa, a common group of grasses found in the squirrel's preferred habitat. The species also occasionally eats roots, bulbs and flower heads. It also depends on grasses that grow in open meadows and shrub/grasslands bordered by coniferous forests of older ponderosa pine and Douglas fir, and cannot survive in densely-packed tree areas. The squirrels need large quantities of seeds and other green leafy vegetation to store body energy for the eight months it spends in hibernation.

Habitat loss and fragmentation is the main reason for the squirrel's decline. Habitat fragmentation and the subsequent disconnection of squirrel populations occurs when trees overtake meadows, or when land is converted to agriculture or developed. Fire suppression, competition from the larger Columbian ground squirrel, and recreational shooting also have contributed to the species' decline.

The State of Idaho recognizes the northern Idaho ground squirrel as a "species of special concern," which protects it from being killed or possessed. The Service has been working with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game, Cornell University and Albertson College of Idaho, other federal agencies and private landowners to reduce threats to the northern Idaho ground squirrel. Recovery strategies such as habitat enhancement, experimental translocations, and controlled burns have been implemented. The Payette National Forest signed a conservation agreement with the Service in 1996, and one private landowner has been working with the Service to study the species and relocate them to Forest Service land. Another private landowner has entered into a Safe Harbor Agreement with the Service to conserve squirrels on their property.

The objective of a recovery plan is to provide a framework for species recovery in its natural habitat so that ESA protection is no longer necessary. It identifies species and habitat factors of concern for those considering activities that may affect the species. The plan also describes tasks that when accomplished, should ensure the species' survival and eventual removal from the endangered and threatened species list.

Under the draft recovery plan, the squirrel will be considered for delisting when at least 30 population sites are distributed throughout its historic range and there are at least 100-500 individuals in 20 to 30 of those sites. Genetic exchange must also exist between the populations in order to ensure the long-term survival of the squirrel. Linking the populations along suitable habitat corridors will provide a way for that exchange to take place.

The notice of availability for the draft recovery plan was published in the July 15, 2002 issue of the *Federal Register*. The draft plan is available for public inspection during normal business hours at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Snake River Basin Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Suite 368, Boise, Idaho 83709. Information and comments are invited, and may be submitted directly to the Service at the above address; by fax at (208) 378-5262; or by electronic submission at the following e-mail address: FW1SRBOComment@fws.gov. The subject line must state "Northern Idaho Ground Squirrel Comments," with the name and address of person submitting comments included in the message.

Comments received by September 13, 2002 will be considered in the development of the final recovery plan for this species. For more information, please contact Rich Howard, Snake River Basin Office fish and wildlife biologist, at (208) 378-5297.

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses nearly 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas.

It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.