



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

## NEWS RELEASE

SNAKE RIVER FISH AND WILDLIFE OFFICE  
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### PUBLIC INVITED TO COMMENT ON PROPOSED SOUTHERN IDAHO GROUND SQUIRREL CANDIDATE CONSERVATION AGREEMENT AND DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) today published a Notice of Availability (NOA) for a proposed Southern Idaho Ground Squirrel Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances, as well as an accompanying draft Environmental Assessment regarding the Agreement. The NOA and the draft EA appear in today's *Federal Register*. Public comments on both documents will be accepted until June 7, 2004.

The southern Idaho ground squirrel (*Spermophilus brunneus endemicus*) was identified as a candidate for federal protection under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 2001. The species is found in lower elevation shrub-steppe habitat in the Weiser River Basin in southwest Idaho. Eighty-five percent of the squirrel's current habitat is on private property, and the Agreement addresses those lands.

The Idaho Department of Fish and Game (Department) has applied to the Service for an enhancement of survival permit through Section 10 of the Act. The permit application includes the proposed Programmatic Southern Idaho Ground Squirrel Candidate Conservation Agreement between the Service, the Department, and the Idaho Governor's Office of Species Conservation.

Under the proposed Agreement, the parties would implement conservation measures for the squirrel on approximately 1,046,569 acres in Adams, Gem, Payette and Washington Counties. The primary goal of the Agreement is to implement habitat and population conservation measures for the species on non-Federal lands enrolled in the Agreement. Habitat conservation measures should focus on restoration or protection of native plant communities, as well as other habitat management measures to benefit the squirrel. If appropriate, the Service may authorize reintroducing or moving ground squirrels to suitable, unoccupied habitat.

Candidate Conservation Agreements consist of voluntary conservation activities by participating landowners that may benefit species that are proposed for federal protection under the ESA, or other sensitive species. Landowners who are interested in conserving the squirrel, and who have suitable habitat on their property and are willing to participate in certain conservation measures may enroll in the Agreement. Enrollees agree to implement conservation practices on their lands to remove or reduce threats to the species. In return, the Service assures landowners that additional regulatory restrictions will not be placed on their land management practices in the future should the species be placed under federal protection. If the Agreement is finalized, a permit authorizing incidental take of southern Idaho ground squirrels would be issued to each participating landowner enrolled under the Agreement. The proposed term of the Agreement is 20 years.

“Fish and wildlife conservation requires strong partnerships, and Candidate Conservation Agreements provide a great opportunity for proactive species conservation amongst partners,” said Jeff Foss, Field Supervisor of the Service’s Snake River Fish and Wildlife Office.” We are encouraged by the interest in this proposed Agreement for southern Idaho ground squirrels, and we look forward to working with interested landowners.”

To comply with NEPA, the Service has prepared a draft Environmental Assessment in conjunction with the Agreement. The purpose of the EA is to evaluate the proposal, present several alternatives for implementation of the proposal, and facilitate public comments. Proposed alternatives for implementation of the Agreement and analysis of each appear in the draft document. The EA is published under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s “Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances Final Policy” (64 FR 32726).

Comments on both the proposed Programmatic Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances and the draft Environmental Assessment may be submitted in writing to: Carmen Thomas, Project Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Snake River Fish and Wildlife Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, Idaho 83709. Comments may also be faxed to 208-378-5262, or e-mailed to [fw1srbocomment@fws.gov](mailto:fw1srbocomment@fws.gov). Please include “SIGS CCAA Comments” in the title line for faxes and e-mails. Please submit electronic comments in an ASCII file format, and avoid the use of special characters and encryption. If our Internet connection is disrupted, please submit your comments by mail or fax, and obtain hard copies of the documents from the contact office above.

The documents may also be viewed online at <http://idahoes.fws.gov>. For more information about private landowner conservation planning, please contact Carmen Thomas, Snake River Fish and Wildlife Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, Idaho 83709, 208-378-5243.

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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 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 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.*