

## **QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR THE UTAH PRAIRIE DOG REVISED 90-DAY FINDING**

### **What are the conclusions of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the petition to reclassify the Utah prairie dog from threatened to endangered?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) completed a revised 90-day petition finding for the Utah prairie dog. After evaluating all of the scientific information described or cited in the petition and the information readily available in our files, we concluded that the petitioners did not provide substantial information indicating that reclassifying the Utah prairie dog from threatened to endangered may be warranted under the Endangered Species Act (Act).

### **What is the current status of the Utah prairie dog?**

The Utah prairie dog was listed as an endangered species in 1973. In 1984, the Service reclassified the species as threatened. The primary threats to the species are habitat loss from urban development and loss of prairie dog colonies from plague outbreaks. On-going conservation efforts to address these threats include: protection of occupied habitat, Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs), plague response, and plague research. Despite these threats, Utah prairie dog populations are stable to increasing. Recent population estimates are among the highest recorded since listing. Specifically, five of the seven highest population counts have occurred since 2005.

### **What is a 90-day petition finding?**

The ESA provides for citizens to petition the Service to take listing actions, including adding species to the lists of threatened and endangered wildlife and plants as well as removing species from the lists. The Service is required to make a 90-day finding on whether the petition presents substantial information that the petitioned action may be warranted. That finding is to be made within 90 days, to the maximum extent practicable, after receipt of the petition and is to be published in the Federal Register.

Findings are based on information contained in the petition, supporting information submitted with the petition, and other information available in our files at the time.

We first received this petition to reclassify the Utah prairie dog as an endangered species on February 3, 2003 from WildEarth Guardians *et al.* (formerly Forest Guardians, hereafter referred to as the petitioners). We concluded on February 21, 2007 that the petition did not contain substantial information that the species should be reclassified to endangered. However, our 2007 decision was challenged by the petitioners in litigation. On September 28, 2010, our 2007 90-day finding was remanded and we were directed by the Court to address cumulative effects and to consider whether the loss of historical range constituted a significant portion of the species range.

### **What is meant by substantial information?**

When the Service evaluates a petition, we consider the adequacy and reliability of the information supporting the action advocated by the petition. A “substantial” finding indicates we have determined that adequate and reliable information was presented that would lead a reasonable person to believe the petitioned action may be warranted. In this case, we would begin a formal status review of the species. A “not substantial” finding ends the petition process.

### **How does the Service determine whether a species is endangered or threatened?**

Under the Act, the term “endangered species” means any species in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. The term “threatened species” means any species at risk of becoming an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

In simple terms: **Endangered species** are at ~~the brink~~risk of extinction now.  
**Threatened species** are likely to be at ~~the brink~~risk in the near future.

We determine whether a species is endangered or threatened based on one or more of the following five factors:

1. The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range;
2. Over utilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or education purposes;
3. Disease or predation;
4. The inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; or
5. Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

We assess these factors based on the best scientific and commercial data available.

### **What specifically did the Service look at to determine if reclassification of the Utah prairie dog to endangered may be warranted?**

We conducted an analysis of the information the petition provided regarding the five factors (described in the previous question) specified in the Act. Additionally, we addressed the two items remanded by the Court: cumulative effects of the listing factors and consideration of whether the loss of historical range constituted a significant portion of the species range. We determined that the petitioners did not present substantial information that any of the five factors or the remanded items currently endangers the Utah prairie dog with extinction. Long-term population trends since the downlisting of the Utah prairie dog in 1984 remain stable to increasing, indicating that the threats, while they still exist, are not negatively changing the population trends of the species. Primary threats to the species include urbanization and plague. However, these threats do not rise to the level of endangering the species with extinction such that it would meet the definition of an endangered species. In addition, the species is currently listed as a threatened species and is protected under the Act and benefits from conservation measures and recovery actions afforded by Federal protection.

### **What is the historic and current range of Utah prairie dogs?**

The Utah prairie dog is the western-most member of the genus *Cynomys* and has the most restricted range of the five prairie dog species. Historically, the species' distribution included portions of Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, Juab, Millard, Piute, Sanpete, Sevier, Washington, and Wayne Counties, Utah. Utah prairie dog populations began to decline when control programs were initiated in the 1920s, and by the 1960s the species' distribution was greatly reduced as a result of poisoning, sylvatic plague (a nonnative disease), drought, and habitat alteration induced by agricultural and grazing activities. Today, Utah prairie dogs are limited to the central and southwestern quarter of Utah in portions of seven counties -- Beaver, Garfield, Iron, Kane, Piute, Sevier, and Wayne Counties.

### **Why is the Utah prairie dog important?**

As a keystone species, prairie dogs have a large effect on the ecosystem. Prairie dogs decrease vegetation height and increase landscape diversity. Burrowing and excavation mixes the soil and promotes uptake of nitrogen by plants. Their burrow and mound systems change soil chemistry by aerating the soil to allow deep penetration of precipitation, and by increasing the incorporation of organic materials into the soil. Several wildlife species such as burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*), rabbits (*Lepus spp.*), ground squirrels (*Spermophilus spp.*), weasels (*Mustela spp.*), and badgers (*Taxidea taxus*) also rely on the habitat conditions created by Utah prairie dog colonies, and frequently use their burrows.

### **What does a Utah prairie dog look like, and how does it live?**

The Utah prairie dog is the smallest species of prairie dog and is approximately 10-16 inches long and weighs around ½ to 3 pounds. It is a small cinnamon to clay-colored rodent with a short, white or gray-tipped tail, and black "eyebrows" above each eye. Within colonies, prairie dogs are social animals that live in family groups. Utah prairie dogs occur in semi-arid shrub-steppe and grassland habitats at elevations of 5,400 to 9,500 feet. Since Utah prairie dogs are burrowing animals, soils are very important for colony locations and must be well-drained and at least 1 meter (3 feet) deep. Utah prairie dogs hibernate in the fall and emerge and mate in the spring.

### **How can I find out more information?**

A copy of the revised 90-day finding and other information about the Utah prairie dog is available on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/mammals/UTprairiedog/index.htm> or by contacting Utah Field Office at 2369 West Orton Circle, West Valley City, Utah 84119 (telephone 801/975 3330; facsimile 801/975-3331).