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## SWIFT FOX NO LONGER ENDANGERED LIST CANDIDATE

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Monday that promising new biological information on the swift fox led the agency to remove the small, cat-sized prairie animal from consideration for listing as an endangered species in need of federal protection.

"We're gratified our work to document the range of the swift fox in Montana contributed to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision," said Don Childress, chief of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' wildlife division. "Montana's swift fox populations are growing. The success of the swift fox is a shining example of how cooperation among the states, the tribes, the federal government and, most important, private landowners leads to good conservation agreements. We're learning more about the animal every day, and I think everyone understands that extraordinary cooperation led to the conservation of this important prairie species and its habitat."

FWP has been monitoring swift fox observations in northcentral Montana since 1985 and, among several other swift fox conservation endeavors, is presently participating in an international effort to determine the distribution and size of the Canada-Montana swift fox population in cooperation with Canadian wildlife agencies and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

In response to a petition to list the swift fox, USFWS determined in 1995 that a threatened listing was warranted but did not proceed because the agency lacked the resources to complete the listing process.

At the time, the "warranted but precluded" finding prompted state wildlife agencies in 10 Great Plains states to form the Swift Fox Conservation Team. The team, in coordination with other interests, assembled existing information, collected new biological data, and implemented swift fox monitoring and management programs.

FWP is a member of the national Swift Fox Conservation Team and a leader of the Montana Swift Fox Working Group whose members include state and federal agencies, conservation groups, and the Blackfeet and Fort Belknap Indian Tribes.

In an assessment of the species' current status, USFWS concluded Monday that although the swift fox has been reduced across much of its historical range, viable populations currently occur in approximately 40 percent of those formerly occupied areas. Federal officials also said the swift fox appears to be more adaptable to a wide range of habitat types and more tolerant of modified land uses than previously believed.

The species was once distributed from southern Canada to the panhandle of Texas, and from central Montana to eastern North Dakota, Childress said. The development of native prairies, unregulated trapping and shooting, and poisoning campaigns aimed at wolves and coyotes all

contributed to the decline in the swift fox's habitat and numbers.

In Montana, the swift fox was declared extinct in 1969. Today, an estimated 350-500 swift foxes inhabit prairie grasslands in Glacier, Toole, Liberty, Hill, Blaine, Phillips and Valley counties. The animal is also thought to be present in several southeastern counties including McCone, Dawson, Prairie, Custer and Powder River counties.

Montana's swift fox populations were primarily established from animals reintroduced in Canada beginning in 1983 that began to disperse into northcentral Montana in 1985. In addition, a swift fox reintroduction program on the Blackfeet Reservation has successfully produced Glacier County's swift fox population.

"I commend the efforts led by the states to address the status of the swift fox," said Ralph Morgenweck, USFWS's director of the Mountain-Prairie Region. "When new data is provided and when circumstances change due to the strenuous efforts of concerned management agencies, the Service takes these factors into consideration in the continuing evaluations required for candidate species."

The primary focus of the national Swift Fox Conservation Team over the past six years has been to document swift fox distribution and to develop and implement a conservation strategy for swift fox.

"In Montana, we're working with government agencies, private landowners, conservation groups and several Indian tribes to identify each of our swift fox populations and to allow the populations to grow and to move into other suitable habitats," Childress said. "Our goal continues to be to improve the long-term health of this and other prairie species."

The swift fox is found in short- to mid-grass prairies with little or no shrubs, but they also inhabit areas of mixed agricultural use. The swift fox diet consists of prairie dogs, ground squirrels, rabbits, small birds, insects, and plant parts.

Swift foxes breed when they are 1 to 2 years old and can live up to 10 years in the wild. They excavate their own dens, but will use old badger holes or prairie dog burrows. They are primarily nocturnal animals who use the night to avoid coyotes, eagles, and hawks and other predators.

A mature swift fox is about the size of a house cat. It weighs about five pounds and is about three feet long from head to tail. The color is orangeish-tan on the back, fading to a light tan on the belly. The tip of the tail is black and there are black spots on the muzzle. The swift fox is about one-half the size of the red fox, which has a white-tipped tail.

The smallest of the canids, the swift fox is only found in the Great Plains of North America.