

NEWS RELEASE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Mountain-Prairie Region

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Fish and Wildlife Service to Conduct Status Review of Whitebark Pine

Scientific Information Will Be Accepted Until September 20, 2010

Whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) may warrant federal protection as a threatened or endangered species, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today, following an initial review of a petition seeking to protect whitebark pine under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Whitebark pine is a 5-needled conifer species whose coastal distribution extends from the Bulkley Mountains in British Columbia to the northeastern Olympic Mountains and Cascade Range in Washington and Oregon to the Kern River of the Sierra Nevada Range of east-central California. The Rocky Mountain distribution extends from northern British Columbia and Alberta to Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, and Nevada.

The Service will undertake a more thorough review (known as a status review or a 12-month finding) of whitebark pine to determine if adding the species to the federal list of threatened and endangered wildlife and plants is warranted.

Today's decision, commonly known as a 90-day finding, is based on scientific information about whitebark pine provided in the petition from the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) requesting listing of the species under the ESA. The petition finding does not mean that the Service has decided it is appropriate to give whitebark pine federal protection under the ESA. Rather, this finding is the first step in a long process that triggers a more thorough review of all the biological information available.

To ensure this review is comprehensive, the Service is soliciting information from state and federal natural resource agencies, Native American Tribes, the scientific community, industry, and any other interested parties regarding whitebark pine and its habitat.

The Service is seeking information regarding whitebark pine's status including historic and current range, historic and current population levels and current and projected trends, distribution patterns, and past and ongoing conservation measures for the species and its habitat.

If listing whitebark pine is warranted, the Service intends to propose critical habitat and therefore requests information on what may constitute the physical and biological features essential to the conservation of the species; where these features are currently found; whether any of these features may require special management considerations or protection; and whether there are specific areas outside the geographical area occupied by the species that are essential to the conservation of the species.

Scientific information will be accepted until September 20, 2010 and can be submitted electronically via the Federal eRulemaking Portal at: <http://www.regulations.gov>, or can be mailed or hand delivered to Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R6-ES-2010-0047; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Suite 222; Arlington, VA 22203.

The Service will evaluate all information regarding the status and distribution of whitebark pine, including direct and indirect effects, to the species resulting from either human activities or natural causes.

In December 2008, the Natural Resources Defense Council petitioned the Service to list whitebark pine and designate critical habitat. The petitioner asserts that climate change is one of the most significant threats to whitebark pine and that climate change will increase the incidence of white pine blister rust pathogen (an introduced fungal disease) and the mountain pine beetle.

The petition also provides information indicating that climate change may change fire patterns in western North America. Whitebark pine communities were historically maintained by low-intensity fires that kill competing Douglas-fir, true fir, other pines, and spruce trees. The suppression of fire produces a competitive advantage to other tree species, resulting in the loss of habitat or niche space for whitebark pine.

After reviewing the petition, the Service believes that listing whitebark pine may be warranted due to disease and predation, specifically, white pine blister rust and mountain pine beetle, and the inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms to address them. These primary threats are exacerbated by threats from habitat loss due to changes in forest composition and fire regimes from fire suppression practices. The Service will investigate these threats in more detail during the status review.

Whitebark pine is a 5-needled conifer classified as a stone pine which includes five species worldwide. Stone pines are distinguished by large, dense seeds that lack wings and therefore depend upon birds and squirrels for dispersal across the landscape. Whitebark pine is typically found in cold, windy, high elevation or high latitude sites in western North America and as a result, many stands are geographically isolated. It is a stress-tolerant pine and its hardiness allows it to grow where other conifer species cannot. Whitebark pine is considered a keystone species because it regulates runoff by slowing the progress of snowmelt, reduces soil erosion by initiating early succession after fires and other disturbances, and provides seeds that are a high-energy food source for some birds and mammals.

This finding will be published in the Federal Register on July 20, 2010.

For more information regarding whitebark pine, please visit our web site at:
<http://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/species/plants/whitebarkpine>

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