

NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE WILL NOT CONDUCT IN-DEPTH REVIEW TO CONSIDER RECLASSIFYING THE UTAH PRAIRIE DOG FROM THREATENED TO ENDANGERED

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has concluded that a petition to reclassify the Utah prairie dog from threatened to endangered under the Endangered Species Act (Act) does not contain substantial scientific data to indicate that reclassification might be warranted. Therefore, the species will remain classified as threatened under the Act at this time. The finding will be published in the *Federal Register* on June 21, 2011.

Endangered means the species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range; threatened means the species is likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

We made our determination in response to a petition first received on February 3, 2003, from WildEarth Guardians *et al.* (formerly Forest Guardians) to reclassify the Utah prairie dog as an endangered species. Under the Act, the Service is required to review petitions to decide whether they contain substantial scientific information that the petitioned action may be warranted in a process known as a 90-day finding.

On February 21, 2007, we concluded that the petition did not contain substantial information that the species should be reclassified to endangered. Our 2007 decision was challenged by the petitioners through litigation. On September 28, 2010, the Court remanded our 2007 90-day finding and directed us to address the cumulative effects of the threats to the species, and to consider whether the loss of historical range constituted a significant portion of the species range, such that reclassifying the species from threatened to endangered may be warranted.

In this revised 90-day finding, we addressed these items, and assessed scientific information provided by the petitioners and in our files regarding potential impacts to the Utah prairie dog from habitat loss, illegal shooting, disease, regulatory mechanisms, and the translocation program.

We determined that the petition did not present substantial information that these factors currently endanger 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 these threats, while they still exist, are not negatively changing the population trends.

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.

There are ongoing conservation efforts in place for Utah prairie dogs including efforts to protect occupied habitat and respond to plague, research, voluntary conservation plans with private landowners (e.g. Habitat Conservation Plans), and conservation and consultation with other Federal agencies.

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 in Utah.

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.

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.

The Utah prairie dog was listed as an endangered species in 1973. In 1984, the Service reclassified the species as threatened. Currently, the primary threats to the species are habitat loss from urban development and loss of prairie dog colonies due to plague outbreaks. 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 recorded since 1985 have occurred since 2005.

As a keystone species, Utah prairie dogs have a large effect on the ecosystem. Prairie dogs decrease vegetation height and increase landscape diversity. Burrowing and excavation by prairie dogs 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.

The Act provides a critical safety net for America's native fish, wildlife and plants. This landmark conservation law has prevented the extinction of hundreds of imperiled species across the nation and promoted the recovery of many others.

The Service's priority is to make implementation of the Act less complex, less contentious, and more effective. The agency seeks to accelerate recovery of threatened and endangered species across the nation while making it easier for people to coexist with these species.

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 the Utah Field Office at 2369 West Orton Circle, West Valley City, Utah 84119 (telephone 801/975-3330; facsimile 801/975-3331).

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.