

NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE WITHDRAWS PROPOSAL TO LIST THE GRAHAM'S BEARDTONGUE

The U.S Fish and Wildlife Service today withdrew its proposal to protect the Graham's beardtongue, an herbaceous perennial plant found in northwestern Colorado and northeastern Utah, as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

After a careful review and assessment of the best scientific and commercial information available, the Service determined that existing and potential impacts to the plant and its habitat do not warrant adding it to the federal list of threatened and endangered species. Under the ESA, a species can be listed as endangered if it is in danger of extinction within all or a significant portion of its range, or as threatened if the species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

On January 19, 2006, the Service proposed to list the Graham's beardtongue as a threatened species and designate 3,058 acres as critical habitat for the species in Rio Blanco County, Colorado and Duchesne and Uintah counties in Utah. Approximately 60 percent of the existing population of Graham's beardtongue occurs on federal lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and approximately 75 percent of the proposed critical habitat acreage is also on BLM land.

All available information indicates the Graham's beardtongue has not had a documented decrease in its population numbers or range of distribution. Potential threats to the species' habitat from energy development include traditional oil and gas exploration, field development and production. These activities have to date been adequately mitigated by BLM policy direction, land use planning and on-the-ground protective measures. BLM has implemented conservation stipulations for the plant on oil and gas well locations. Conservation measures also include moving well pad and pipeline locations to avoid direct impact to the plants.

Oil shale development also has the potential to cause increased habitat loss and fragmentation in areas occupied by Graham's beardtongue; however, there is uncertainty in the eventual locations of oil shale extraction as well as the technological and economic viability of commercial production. Within the foreseeable future, the Service concluded there is no likely significant impact on the species' population from oil shale or tar sand energy development while it's at least 30 miles distant.

In addition, BLM has committed to develop appropriate regulations for the commercial oil shale/tar sands leasing program as set forth in the Energy Policy Act of 2005, and to develop conservation measures for the Graham's beardtongue. These conservation measures are intended to eliminate significant threats to the species from such development. Because these conservation measures have not yet been developed, the Service is not basing this withdrawal on their potential implementation. However, development and implementation of sufficient conservation measures should ensure long-term protection of the plant.

In making this finding, the Service recognizes there are potential future threats to the Graham's beardtongue from energy development, particularly if oil shale and tar sands development is commercialized in the Uinta Basin. If the realization of any potential threats occurs, the Service will reevaluate this finding.

The Graham's beardtongue currently is known to exist in a series of small populations that extend in a narrow band from Raven Ridge west of the town of Rangely in Rio Blanco County, Colorado westward to the vicinity of Sand Wash near the point where Carbon, Duchesne, and Uintah counties meet in Utah's Uinta Basin.

The Graham's beardtongue is an herbaceous perennial plant within the sub-genus *Cristai*. Each plant has one to three stems arising from a taproot. These stems are 7-18 centimeters tall. The plant has a cluster of flowers (usually of 3 to 20) although occasionally just one or two are present. The color of the petals varies from light to dark lavender, or pinkish, with dark violet lines in the throat of the corolla tube.

This finding is published in today's Federal Register. For more information, please visit <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/plants/grahamsbeardtongue/index.htm>.

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 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources 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 and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.