



## U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service

### Nevada Fish and Wildlife Office

*Conserving the Biological Diversity of the Great Basin, Eastern Sierra, and Mojave Desert*

## *Questions and Answers*

### *Pygmy Rabbit 12-Month Finding*

***Q. What is the pygmy rabbit?***

**A.** The pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) is a member of the family Leporidae, which includes hares and rabbits, and is the smallest North American rabbit. Adults weigh about 0.5 to 1 pound and are about 9 to 12 inches in length.

***Q. What is the pygmy rabbit's habitat?***

**A.** Pygmy rabbits are typically found in areas of tall, dense sagebrush (*Artemisia spp.*) cover. They are highly dependent on sagebrush (99 percent of their diet in winter) to provide both food and shelter throughout the year.

The pygmy rabbit is believed to be one of only two leporids in Northern America that digs its own burrows. Pygmy rabbit burrows are typically found in relatively deep, loose soils of wind-borne or water-born origin. They occasionally make use of burrows abandoned by other species and as a result, may occur in areas of shallower or more compact soils that support sufficient shrub cover.

***Q. Where have pygmy rabbits been found historically?***

**A.** The pygmy rabbit's historical range is in portions of the following states: California, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, and Washington. They are not distributed continuously across their range.

***Q. Why did the Service complete a 12-month finding (in-depth review) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for pygmy rabbit?***

**A.** On May 20, 2005, the Service published a non-substantial 90-day finding in response to an April 1, 2003, petition from the Committee for High Desert, Western Watersheds Project, American Lands Alliance, Oregon Natural Desert Association, Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, Center for Native Ecosystems, and Mr. Craig Criddle, requesting the pygmy rabbit in Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah, California and Nevada, be listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA. The Service determined the petition did not contain substantial information indicating that listing of the pygmy rabbit may be warranted. On September 26, 2007, the United States District Court for the District of Idaho issued a judgment and memorandum order in response to a March 28, 2006, complaint stating the Service improperly imposed a higher standard when it reviewed the petition. The court remanded the Service's May 20, 2005, 90-day finding, and a

subsequent substantial 90-day finding was issued on January 8, 2008, initiating a review of the species.

***Q. Were all eight states included in the status review?***

**A.** No, although the pygmy rabbit occurs in Washington, that state was not included in this review. The Columbia Basin Distinct Population Segment of the pygmy rabbit which occurs in central Washington was listed as endangered on March 5, 2003. The Service is conducting a review of that population and expects to complete it in October.

***Q. What are the results of the pygmy rabbit 12-month finding?***

**A.** Based on a review of the best scientific and commercial information available, the Service finds there has been, and continues to be, some loss and degradation of pygmy rabbit habitat range wide, but not to the magnitude of constituting a significant threat to the species. Available information does not indicate pygmy rabbits are significantly impacted by sagebrush loss or modification from various actions, hunting, research activities, predation, or disease. Existing regulatory mechanisms appear to be adequate to conserve the species. Additionally, the Service finds that available information does not indicate other potential threats such as inter- and intra-specific competition, stochastic events, mortality caused by collisions with vehicles, recreational activities, and habitat modification due to climate change significantly impact the species. Therefore, the Service concludes that listing of the pygmy rabbit is not warranted at this time.

The following is a summary of the status review:

- **FACTOR A:** The petitioners claim that the pygmy rabbit has been subject to population losses and declines due to direct loss of sagebrush habitat from many different practices and events including conversion of sagebrush habitat for agricultural purposes, livestock grazing, urban and rural development, energy development, invasive plant species, and fires. The Service acknowledges many of these factors have affected sagebrush habitat across the range of the pygmy rabbit. Despite the loss and modification of sagebrush habitat across the pygmy rabbit's range, the species continues to occur in areas where these various activities are present across the landscape. Based on the comparison of historical (1877-1999) and current (2000-2008) distribution data, pygmy rabbits continue to occur in a similar distributional pattern with its historical distribution. While there may be a small range contraction in northeastern California, recent surveys have found pygmy rabbits in previously unknown areas throughout its range most notably in Wyoming. The Service concludes that the available information considered in this finding does not indicate Factor A is a significant threat to the species.
- **FACTOR B:** The petitioners contend that pygmy rabbit populations could be harmed due to hunting mortality and research activities. The Service has limited information indicating hunting of pygmy rabbits occurred historically. Currently hunting occurs in three States, California, Nevada and Montana. Historical harvest records are not available, and the number of pygmy rabbits taken through hunting is not discernable because of the method by which present-day data are collected. The available information does not indicate that hunting is a significant threat. The Service also has information that research activities have resulted in

injury or death of some pygmy rabbits. However, injuries and mortality from research activities is limited in geographic distribution and number and does not constitute a significant threat to the species.

- **FACTOR C:** The petitioners claim that disease and predation likely pose serious threats to pygmy rabbit populations. Pygmy rabbits can harbor high parasite loads, but the available information does not indicate this is negatively impacting pygmy rabbits. The available information does not report any disease epizootics in pygmy rabbit populations anywhere within its range considered in the finding. Predation has been reported as the main cause of mortality in pygmy rabbits. However, available information does not indicate that predation is negatively impacting pygmy rabbit populations across its range. Therefore the Service concludes that available information does not indicate predation is a significant threat to the species.
- **FACTOR D:** The petitioners contend that State and Federal agencies have failed to protect the pygmy rabbit and its habitat in a significant portion of its range due to the inadequacies of existing regulatory mechanisms. The Service is unaware of any States implementing conservation actions specifically for pygmy rabbits, but all seven States have wildlife conservation strategies that provide for general species and habitat management. There are various regulatory mechanisms that guide the protection, conservation, or management of the pygmy rabbit or its habitat on Federal lands including: BLM 6840 Manual and 2673.1 Manual; National Environmental Policy Act; Federal Land Policy and Management Act; National Forest Management Act; National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act; and the National Park Service Organic Act. Based on the available information, the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms is not a significant threat to the pygmy rabbit or their habitat.
- **FACTOR E:** The petitioners contend that other factors, such as inter- and intra-specific competition, stochastic events, mortality caused by collisions with vehicles, recreational activities, and life history traits negatively impact pygmy rabbit populations. Available information does not indicate pygmy rabbits are competing with other pygmy rabbits, other leporid species, or other species at levels that are detrimental to the species. Impacts to pygmy rabbits from stochastic events have been rarely reported. Impacts to pygmy rabbits due to climate change are unclear. While recreational activities occur in sagebrush habitat within the range of the pygmy rabbit and could result in sagebrush habitat modification or destruction or disturbance to individuals, available information does not indicate that pygmy rabbits are being negatively impacted. Roads occur throughout the range of the pygmy rabbit, but only two mortalities have been documented. The available information does not indicate how the species has been adversely impacted by its life history traits. Available information does not indicate that Factor E is a significant threat to the pygmy rabbit.

***Q. Where can more information about the 12-month finding be found?***

**A.** For more information about the pygmy rabbit and this finding, please visit the Service's web site at <http://www.fws.gov/nevada> or by calling (775) 861-6300.