



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Proposed Reclassification of the Columbian White-Tailed Deer from Endangered to Threatened

#### **What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposing for the Columbian white-tailed deer?**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to reclassify the Columbia River Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of the Columbian white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus leucurus*) from endangered to threatened, under the authority of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (ESA). This proposal is based on a thorough review of the best available scientific data, which indicates the species' status has improved such that it is not currently in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

The Service is also considering a 4(d) rule to exempt certain ongoing land management activities from take prohibitions if the Columbian white-tailed deer is downlisted, when those activities are conducted in a manner consistent with the conservation of the deer. This rule would give states and private landowners enhanced management flexibility.

#### **How are the terms endangered and threatened defined by the Service under the Endangered Species Act of 1973?**

For the purposes of ESA, a species is *endangered* if it is in danger of extinction throughout all or a “significant portion of its range” and is *threatened* if it is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a “significant portion of its range.” The distinction between the two being whether a species is currently in danger of extinction, or in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future.

#### **What led to the proposal to reclassify the Columbia River DPS from endangered to threatened?**

In the 1983 Revised Recovery Plan for Columbian white-tailed deer, the Service established two criteria for downlisting the species to threatened. First, maintain a minimum of at least 400 Columbian white-tailed deer across the Columbia River DPS. Second, maintain three viable subpopulations of at least 50 deer during

November population counts, with two of those populations located on secure habitat. The Recovery Plan defines secure habitat as that which is free from adverse human activities in the foreseeable future and relatively safe from natural phenomena that would negatively impact the Columbian white-tailed deer.

The population of Columbian white-tailed deer is at over 900 individuals. In addition to the new Ridgefield sub-population of 88 individuals, there are three other secure sub-populations at or near Julia Butler Hansen Refuge: about 100 deer on refuge mainland, 155 on the refuge's Tenasillahe Island and 230 on private Puget Island. Beyond that, there are several hundred deer on unsecure private lands.

A 5-year review of the Columbian white-tailed deer's status was completed in November 5, 2013. This review concluded that Columbian white-tailed deer's status had substantially improved since listing and the species had met the Recovery Plan's criteria for downlisting. The Columbian white-tailed deer no longer met the definition of an endangered species under the ESA, and therefore the status review recommended the species be reclassified from endangered to threatened.

**Columbian white-tailed deer were recently moved to several new habitats as part of an emergency relocation program due to threat of flooding. Did those translocations contribute to the proposed reclassification to threatened?**

No. The service based its decision to propose reclassification of the Columbia River DPS on an analysis of the status of Columbian white-tailed deer with respect to the Recovery Plan's downlisting criteria and the current threats affecting the DPS. Neither of the translocated populations of Columbian white-tailed deer (Cottonwood Island and Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge) contributed to the DPS meeting those downlisting criteria. However, because Ridgefield provides good habitat for the deer, it is anticipated that the population will thrive there. If so, the Ridgefield population could, in the future, contribute to full recovery and delisting of the DPS.

**What is the history of the Columbian white-tailed deer's classification under the ESA?**

On March 11, 1967, the Secretary of the Interior identified Columbian white-tailed deer as an endangered species, under the authority of the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966. At this time only a small population was known to survive on islands in the lower Columbia River and a small area of nearby

mainland Washington. In 1978, a small population of Columbian white-tailed deer was identified in Douglas County, in Southwest Oregon, and was also listed as endangered. Since then, the Douglas County population rebounded and was subsequently delisted in July 2003.

### **What were the historical threats to the Columbian white-tailed deer and its habitat?**

Early records indicate that Columbian white-tailed deer were once quite numerous over their historic range, from the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains to the ocean and from Puget Sound in Washington southward to the Umpqua River Basin in southern Oregon. They became endangered due to habitat loss and modification by human activities, such as farming and logging, as well as commercial and residential development. Overhunting and poaching also contributed to their decline.

### **What are the current threats to the Columbian white-tailed deer and its habitat?**

Threats to the Columbia River DPS from habitat loss or degradation exist but have lessened due to enhancement of existing habitat throughout the DPS. Predation can threaten certain subpopulations if the habitat conditions are poor and predator control is not in practice, but the threat is fairly localized and, as subpopulation increase in size and health, the negative impact of predation decreases. Vehicle collisions, disease and hybridization occur on occasion but do not pose a threat of extinction to the DPS. Finally, the threat of sea-level rise due to climate change could potentially be a long term threat to subpopulations that reside on low lying land not adequately protected by dikes.

### **What threats were evaluated to determine the appropriate listing classification?**

Under the ESA, there are five categories of threats evaluated to determine the appropriate classification status. These include destruction or modification of habitat, overutilization of the land, disease or predation, inadequate regulation, and other manmade or natural harmful factors. The evaluation of Columbian white-tailed deer found none of these factors rise to the level of threatening the continued existence of the species. Our analysis indicates the Columbian white-tailed deer is not at risk of extinction in the foreseeable future throughout all or a significant portion of its range and does not, therefore, meet the definition of an endangered species.

### **What new information do we have about the Columbian white-tailed deer?**

There are currently more than 900 Columbian white-tailed deer and four viable subpopulations in Tenasillahe Island, Julia Butler Hansen Mainland Unit, Puget Island, and Westport/ Wallace Island. Two of these subpopulations are now considered secure, Tenasillahe Island and Puget Island. The newly translocated Ridgefield NWR population is expected to grow and eventually represent an additional viable and secure subpopulation.

Columbian white-tailed deer in the Columbia River DPS were previously limited to areas in between Karlson Island and Wallace Island but are now found upriver all the way to Ridgefield, Washington.

### **How is a Columbian white-tailed deer different from the deer we commonly see?**

The Columbian white-tailed deer is the westernmost representative of 30 subspecies of white-tailed deer in North and Central America. It resembles other white-tailed deer subspecies, ranging in size from 85 to 100 pounds for females, and 115 to 150 pounds for males. Generally, the species displays a red-brown color in summer and gray in winter, with distinct white rings around the eyes and a white ring just behind the nose.

These deer are the only white-tailed deer in the lower Columbia River basin area and are distinguished from the more common Columbian black-tailed deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) by their eye rings and their longer tail, which is brown on top and white underneath; the black-tailed deer have a black tail with a white surface underneath. Also, in white-tailed males, the antler prongs rise from a single main beam unlike black-tails, whose antler prongs fork into two branches.

### **Where are Columbian white-tailed deer found?**

Early accounts indicate that Columbian white-tailed deer once occupied a range of approximately 23,000 square miles in Oregon and Washington. Columbian white-tailed deer currently occur in two separate large populations; the Lower Columbia River population and the Douglas County Population. The Lower Columbia River population is found in Wahkiakum, Cowlitz and Clark Counties in Washington, and Clatsop and Columbia Counties in Oregon. The Douglas County population is found in the Umpqua River Basin, Douglas County, Oregon. The Lower Columbia River and Douglas County populations remain geographically separated by about 200 miles, much of which is unsuitable or discontinuous habitat.

**What characterizes Columbian white-tailed deer habitat?**

Columbian white-tailed deer are closely associated with riverside floodplain habitats in both the Lower Columbia River and Douglas County populations. The deer found on islands in the Columbia River use "tidal spruce" habitats characterized by densely forested swamps covered with tall shrubs and scattered spruce, alder, cottonwood and willows. In Douglas County, the deer use willow and cottonwood habitats along rivers and streams, and are also found in oak-savannah habitats in the upland areas.

**What is the Service doing to work with local interests to reduce impacts from the listing?**

In both Oregon and Washington, we are working with federal, state and local governments and private landowners to develop and implement conservation actions and coordinate land-use guidelines to protect the species with minimal impacts to property uses and values.

The Service is also considering developing a special rule to exempt certain ongoing land management activities from take prohibitions of the ESA if the Columbian white-tailed deer is downlisted, when those activities are conducted in a manner consistent with the conservation of the deer.

**What conservation measures have been carried out for the Columbian white-tailed deer for this population by the Service and partners?**

Partnerships have been, and continue to be, essential to the recovery of the deer. The Columbian white-tailed deer working group, consisting of members from the Service's Refuge and Ecological Services offices, the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, has been meeting for several decades to develop and prioritize recovery activities.

One of the most significant recovery actions taken since the deer was federally listed was the establishment of Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for Columbian white-tailed deer in Cathlamet, Wash. The Cowlitz Indian Tribe has incorporated conservation measures benefitting the deer into their management of land inhabited by one subpopulation. Other conservation actions include: the support and augmentation of existing subpopulations; the enhancement of existing habitat throughout the DPS; the acquisition of new habitat protected for the conservation of Columbian white-tailed deer; and the establishment of new subpopulations via successful translocations within the species' historical range.

**If Columbian white-tailed deer are reclassified to threatened, will the Service continue to monitor and manage the deer?**

Reclassifying the Columbian white-tailed deer to threatened would not change the Service's commitment to continue annual monitoring of the species nor would it change the commitment to pursue full recovery of the species. The Service will retain lead for the species until it is fully recovered and delisted, at which time management responsibility would shift to the states of Oregon and Washington.