

# News Release

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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## Conservation Coalition's Efforts Move Columbian White-tailed Deer Along Road to Recovery in Washington, Oregon

*Service changes status from endangered to threatened, adding to growing list of ESA successes.*

PORTLAND, Oregon – Building upon a record of collaborative conservation and species recovery in the Pacific Northwest, today the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partners celebrated the downlisting of the Columbian white-tailed deer from endangered to threatened in Washington and Oregon. The combined efforts between the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, states of Washington and Oregon, conservation groups, volunteers and the Service have reduced threats and secured populations of deer.

The Columbian white-tailed deer joins a growing list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) that are making progress toward recovery in the Pacific Northwest including the Oregon chub and Modoc sucker, which were both delisted in 2015; the gray wolf, which was removed from Oregon's list of endangered species in 2016; and the greater-sage grouse, which was found not warranted for listing in 2016 after the phenomenal efforts that went into conservation planning to reduce threats.

“This major step on the deer's road to recovery reinforces what can be accomplished when we work together,” said Michael Bean, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks at the Department of Interior. “The Pacific Northwest has been a real leader in working to protect and recover species by working with our partners through collaborative conservation. Here, and across the country, National Wildlife Refuges play an essential role in the recovery of species by providing a safe home base.”

The announcement at Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge illuminated the essential role that Ridgefield NWR and Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer played in the recovery of the deer. The continued recovery of the Columbian white-tailed deer population has extra importance for the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, as the deer carries particular cultural significance for its members.

“We are gratified by the progress that has been achieved towards recovery of this very important component to our culture,” said William Iyall, Chairman of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. “We began our focus on recovery through a Fish and Wildlife Service Tribal Wildlife Grant in 2008, which we believe forged a positive path

towards partnership and recovery. We long for the day and will continue to do our part to see Columbian white-tailed deer fully restored and delisted from the Endangered Species List.”

Penny Becker, Wildlife Diversity Division Manager with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, added: “We’re proud to be part of a strong partnership helping to bring this subspecies of white-tailed deer back toward recovery. Healthy wildlife populations are important to the people of Washington, and we’re excited to continue to work for the recovery of this species.”

While white-tailed deer are common across much of eastern United States, the Columbian white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus leucurus*) is one of 16 unique subpopulations in the United States. It is the only subspecies of white-tail deer found west of the Cascade mountain range.

The Columbian white-tailed deer was listed in 1967 due to habitat loss and modification by human activities, such as farming and logging, as well as commercial and residential development. There are two populations of Columbian white-tailed deer: The Lower Columbia River population, which is found in Wahkiakum, Cowlitz and Clark counties in Washington, and Clatsop and Columbia counties in Oregon. The Lower Columbia River population is the one now being downlisted to threatened, going from about 450 deer in 1967 to more than 900 individuals today. The Douglas County population in the Umpqua River Basin of Oregon was removed from the endangered species list in 2003 due to recovery.

The recovery was enhanced by the establishment of the Julia Butler Hansen Refuge for the Columbian White-tailed Deer in 1971. The refuge was established to protect and manage the endangered deer. Now, there are three viable subpopulations at or near the refuge: on the refuge’s Tenasillahe Island, on Westport and Wallace Islands, and on private land on Puget Island.

A recent risk of a levee failure threatened to put portions of the Julia Butler Hansen Refuge under water. To reduce this risk to the deer population, partners, volunteers and Service staff moved 88 Columbian white-tailed deer over a three-year period to Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge. These translocated deer are expected to thrive and become a viable and secure subpopulation.

Along with the downlisting, the Service is finalizing a special rule under section 4(d) of the ESA to exempt certain ongoing land management activities from the Act’s “take” prohibitions when those activities are conducted in a manner consistent with the conservation of the deer. Take is a term under the ESA that includes harassing or harming listed species. The 4(d) rule gives states and private landowners enhanced management flexibility without reducing the effectiveness of conservation actions or the recovery of the species.

For more information about Columbian white-tailed deer and to view the reclassification, visit <http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/articles.cfm?id=149489413>.

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