

News Release

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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Successful Conservation Partnerships Catalyzed by Endangered Species Act Recover Washington Ground Squirrel, Avoid Need for Federal Protection

PORTLAND, Oregon – Progress in conservation sometimes takes a little while, building project upon project and partnership upon partnership.

That’s the case for the Washington ground squirrel, which is only found on the Columbia Plateau of Oregon and Washington. The squirrel was listed as a candidate species in 1999, meaning there were sufficient threats to propose them as endangered or threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), but development of a proposed listing regulation was precluded by other higher priority listing activities.

Today, due to the successful efforts of a number of diverse partners, the squirrel’s future looks brighter than it has in two decades, leading the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to conclude that the species does not require federal protection. Working in collaboration, the Service and partners have reduced the threats to the squirrel, additional populations of squirrel have been documented, and voluntary and regulatory measures have been put into place to protect the squirrel for the long-term.

“Concerted efforts by the U.S. Navy, Washington and Oregon fish and wildlife agencies, private landowners, and other partners have been successful at balancing agriculture production, wind energy and military readiness with conservation,” said Paul Henson, the Service’s Oregon State Supervisor. “This is what can happen when we all work together and another fine example of how the Endangered Species Act can stimulate collaborative conservation and avoid the need for a species to be officially listed.”

In 2004, the first major step in conservation was the Threemile Canyon Farms multi-species Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances (CCAA), which permanently protected 23,000 acres of Washington ground squirrel habitat from future land conversion. This voluntary agreement with local landowners also conserves the ferruginous hawk, loggerhead shrike and sage sparrow.

“Threemile Canyon Farms is a leader in sustainable agriculture and believes that sound business and environmental practices go hand in hand,” said Marty Myers, general manager of Threemile Canyon Farms. “Working with partners, we’ve been able to balance our business interests with conservation measures that benefit the Washington ground squirrel and other sagebrush-steppe species on the Boardman Conservation Area.”

The most recent partnership on behalf of the Washington ground squirrel is an agreement with the U.S. Navy to provide conservation measures that avoid, minimize and mitigate for the effects of military readiness activities on the Naval Weapons Systems Training Facility in Boardman, Oregon. This area, along with the adjacent 23,000-acre Boardman Conservation Area owned by Threemile Canyon Farms and managed by the Nature Conservancy, contains the largest and most densely occupied habitat throughout the ground squirrel's range.

“For many years the Navy has worked closely and cooperatively with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through our Integrated Natural Resources Management Planning process to develop and implement conservation measures for the Washington ground squirrel while still being able to meet our mission-critical military training operation needs,” said John Phillips, Natural Resources Manager, U.S. Navy. “The Navy understands the need to conserve and protect these resources as part of maintaining a sustainable and realistic military training environment.”

In addition to the conservation measures, new information shows many sites occupied by the squirrel are not as isolated as previously thought, reducing the risk of local extinctions. Washington ground squirrels have also been found to persist in what is considered degraded habitats. Furthermore, habitat conversion to agriculture or urban land use is not expected to occur at high levels across the current range, and energy siting guidelines that protect occupied habitat are being implemented in Oregon.

The Washington ground squirrel is distinguished from other ground squirrels in the region by its smaller size, shorter tail and speckled back. The primary cause for its decline was agricultural conversion of its shrub-steppe habitat, which reduced the squirrel's food sources and made the soil less suitable for burrowing and hibernation.

The Service will continue to monitor Washington ground squirrel populations and potential threats to them to ensure they remain stable and healthy.

This finding for the Washington ground squirrel is part of a batched announcement of findings for nine species from around the country. The announcement also includes a not warranted finding for northern wormwood, a plant of the aster family found along the banks of the Columbia River in Klickitat and Grant Counties of Washington, and Wasco and Sherman Counties of Oregon.

For more information about the Washington ground squirrel or the northern wormwood, visit <http://www.fws.gov/oregonfwo/>.

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