

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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News Release



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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Draft Recovery Plan for the Endangered Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit

60-day comment period begins

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that it is seeking public review and comment on a draft recovery plan for the endangered Columbia Basin distinct population segment (DPS) of the pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*). Notice of availability of the draft recovery plan was published in today's Federal Register and opens a 60-day public comment period that will end on November 6, 2007. The Service listed this distinct population segment under emergency provisions of the Endangered Species Act in 2001, and fully listed it as endangered on March 5, 2003, without critical habitat.

“The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit is critically endangered so recovery will require creative efforts,” said Ren Lohofener, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Pacific Region. “Continued collaboration with our partners and stakeholders will give us the best chance at developing an effective recovery plan.”

The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit was believed to be extinct in the wild in mid-2004. In March, 2007, 20 captive-bred animals were reintroduced to habitats historically occupied by the population in central Washington. These captive-bred animals experienced a high level of predation over the first several weeks following their release, and as of June 15, 2007, four of them remained alive. While this amount of predation seems to be significant, biologists are learning a great deal from this experience and will be able to apply lessons learned to the next reintroduction to help improve the pygmy rabbit’s chances of survival.

The Service considers the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit a DPS because the population is separate from others of its kind and its conservation is significant to the remainder of the species. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit has been isolated from other pygmy rabbit populations for at least 10,000 years, as suggested by the fossil record, and possibly as long as 40,000 to 115,000 years, as suggested by population genetic analyses. It is markedly different genetically from other pygmy rabbit populations and it survives in a unique ecological setting. Historically, the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit was likely found in appropriate shrub-steppe habitat in portions of Douglas, Grant, Lincoln, Adams, Franklin, and Benton Counties, Washington.

Due to dramatic declines in the number of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits in the wild during the 1990s, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) started a captive breeding program for the population in 2001. The captive breeding program has been conducted in cooperation with Washington State University, the Oregon Zoo, and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park. The Service has also cooperated with these efforts since they began and contributes funding through various Federal recovery programs.

Just prior to the initial release effort, there were 86 individuals included in the captive breeding program, three of which were purebred Columbia Basin animals. The balance of the captive population and those recently released to the wild consist of intercross young from controlled matings between Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits and pygmy rabbits of the same taxonomic classification from a discrete population in Idaho.

Intercross breeding has helped facilitate genetic restoration of the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and is considered essential for recovery efforts. Currently, proposed measures to recover the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit in the wild include additional releases of captive-bred animals with at least 75 percent Columbia Basin ancestry.

The pygmy rabbit is the smallest rabbit in North America, with adults weighing about one pound and measuring less than a foot in length. Their overall color is slate-gray tipped with brown. They have whitish bellies, cinnamon-brown legs and chests, and short, rounded ears. Their tails are very small, gray, and nearly unnoticeable. In the wild, pygmy rabbits are typically found in sagebrush habitat, and primarily eat sagebrush, native bunchgrasses, and other perennial plants. The pygmy rabbit is one of only two rabbit species in North America that digs its own burrows and, therefore, is most often found in areas that also include relatively deep, loose soils that allow burrowing.

Threats to the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit include large-scale habitat loss and fragmentation mainly from agricultural development, fire, invasive plant species, recreational activities, and livestock grazing. Other threats include extreme weather, predation, disease, demographic limitations, loss of genetic diversity, and inbreeding. To varying degrees, all of these influences have impacted the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and, in combination, have led to the population's endangered status. At the time of the Service's emergency listing action in 2001, the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit was imminently threatened by its small population size, loss of genetic diversity, and inbreeding, coupled with a lack of suitable, protected habitats in the wild.

The strategic recovery goals are: 1) reduction of imminent threats in order to prevent the extinction of the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit; 2) reestablishment of free-ranging subpopulations over the near term; and 3) establishment of a free-ranging population that would be large enough to withstand foreseeable long term threats. This recovery strategy relies on effective adaptive management and is meant to be a dynamic process. The ultimate goal of Federal recovery efforts is to increase the number, distribution, and security of free-ranging Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits so that the population may eventually be removed from the list of Endangered and Threatened Species.

The Service, in partnership with WDFW, is offering a Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit to non-federal land owners and managers located within the population's historic distribution. Participation in the agreement will provide landowners and managers with assurances that future land-use restrictions will not be imposed on them if they voluntarily implement management measures that would be expected to benefit the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit.

We will have a meeting to discuss the draft recovery plan with stakeholders and other interested members of the public during the 60-day open comment period. The time and location of this meeting will be announced in local media outlets several weeks prior to the meeting date.. Service and WDFW biologists will be available to answer questions. Written comments for the record will be accepted, however there will not be any provisions for receiving oral comments for the record at this meeting.

The draft recovery plan is available for viewing and downloading on our web site at: <http://www.fws.gov/easternwashington/Pygmy%20Rabbit.htm>. Written comments on the draft recovery plan must be received by COB November 6, 2007, and may be mailed to: Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office, 11103 East Montgomery Drive, Spokane, Washington 99206. Comments may also be sent by facsimile at 509-891-6748, or by electronic mail at Fw1CBPRabbit@fws.gov. For all submissions, please include the subject line “**Attn: pygmy rabbit draft recovery plan**”, and your name and a return address in the body of your message. If you do not receive confirmation that we have received your electronic message, please contact us directly by calling our Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office at 509-891-6839.

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 97-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 548 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.

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