

**Recovery Plan for the Columbia Basin Distinct Population of the Pygmy Rabbit**  
**(*Brachylagus idahoensis*)**  
**Questions and Answers**  
**January 23, 2013**

**What is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announcing today?**

The Service is announcing that it has completed the final recovery plan for the endangered Columbia Basin distinct population segment (DPS) of the pygmy rabbit. Notice of availability of the recovery plan is published simultaneously in the Federal Register. You may see a copy of the final recovery plan here: <http://1.usa.gov/XwYqRj>

**What is a recovery plan?**

A federal recovery plan is a blueprint providing guidance for actions by federal, state, and other public agencies and private interests that, when implemented, would lead to the recovery of a federally listed species. Recovery plans are advisory documents and do not obligate the expenditure of funds or require that the recommended actions be implemented.

For the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit, a multi-party recovery team was formed to help develop the 2007 draft recovery plan. The team consisted of representatives from the Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), Washington Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Land Management, The Nature Conservancy, Foster Creek Conservation District, Oregon Zoo, Washington State University, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Many of the recovery team members and other experts on a range of pertinent topics also helped develop the 2011 amendment to the draft recovery plan. Both documents underwent public and peer review, and all comments received were considered during development of the approved 2012 recovery plan.

**Why are recovery efforts underway for the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit?**

Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits are a unique species, native to the Columbia Basin and their continued existence may provide yet undiscovered benefits to the ecosystem. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit population has dramatically declined over the last decade. Their loss would diminish the functional quality of the ecosystem and may have effects we cannot yet understand or quantify.

There are currently no Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits known to occur in the wild, however, it is possible that they may still be found on lands that have not yet been surveyed in central Washington.

**Will recovery efforts result in any land use restrictions?**

A species listed under the ESA is protected from “take,” which means it is unlawful to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect the species, or attempt to engage in any such conduct, even if the activity is unintentional.

Depending on the site specifics, there is some potential for take in areas occupied by Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits for practices such as livestock grazing, plowing, and other agricultural uses and development.

On non-federal lands where pygmy rabbits currently do not occur, and where we do not expect them to occur in the future, there is no potential for take and no restrictions under the ESA.

On non-federal lands where pygmy rabbits may occur, or may disperse to, a safe harbor agreement or a habitat conservation plan with the Service may be an appropriate way to receive “take” protection for current or future lawful land management activities.

On federal lands, or non-federal lands where a federal agency retains management authority or discretion, proposed activities are subject to the ESA’s inter-agency consultation requirements.

### **What is being done to minimize restrictions on land uses?**

Because of these ESA protections, many landowners and managers have expressed concern that the presence of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits on their property could affect their ability to use their land. The Service and WDFW are committed to minimize impacts of recovery efforts on non-federal landowners and managers. To accomplish this, the agencies have developed a Safe Harbor Agreement (SHA) to address the interests of non-federal landowners and managers potentially affected by recovery efforts for the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit. The Agreement provides a process whereby participants can obtain regulatory assurances that their existing land use practices will not be negatively affected by recovery efforts. To date, seventeen landowners or managers have joined the SHA, which now covers over 120,000 acres of land near the two recovery emphasis areas.

### **What is a Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit?**

The pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) is the smallest rabbit species in North America. Adults weigh approximately 1 pound and measure less than 1 foot in length. The pygmy rabbit relies on sagebrush to provide food and shelter throughout the year and is one of only two rabbit species in North America that digs its own burrows. As such, pygmy rabbits are usually found in areas with dense sagebrush cover and that have relatively deep, loose soils. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit has been isolated from other pygmy rabbit populations for thousands of years, is genetically distinct, and occupies an unusual ecological setting compared to other pygmy rabbit populations.

### **Where are Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits found?**

Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits historically occurred throughout central Washington, probably including portions of Douglas, Grant, Lincoln, Adams, Franklin, and Benton Counties. The last known wild subpopulation occurred on State lands in southern Douglas County. This site is also the location for ongoing WDFW reintroduction efforts that were resumed in 2011.

**What are the threats to the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit?**

Threats to the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit include large-scale habitat loss and fragmentation, mainly from past agricultural development, extreme weather, catastrophic loss or resource failure of remaining suitable habitat (e.g., from wildfire or insect infestations), predation, disease, demographic limitations, and loss of genetic diversity. To varying degrees, all of these influences have impacted the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and, in combination, 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 depression, coupled with a lack of suitable, protected habitats in the wild.

**What are the recovery goals for the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit?**

The overall goal of recovery efforts for listed species is to implement protection measures and increase populations to levels where the ESA's protections are no longer necessary.

The short term goal of the recovery effort is to increase the population numbers of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits through intercross breeding and reintroduction efforts to the wild, while reducing the threats at the recovery sites to ensure a high probability of success. The long-term recovery goal is to increase the number, distribution, and security of wild pygmy rabbits within the Columbia Basin so that the population can eventually be removed from the federal list of Threatened and Endangered Species.

**What conservation efforts are currently being made?**

Due to dramatic declines in the number of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits in the wild during the 1990s, WDFW started a captive breeding program for the population in 2001. The Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit was believed to have been extirpated from the wild by mid-2004. The captive breeding program was conducted in cooperation with Washington State University, the Oregon Zoo, and Northwest Trek Wildlife Park. Due to severe inbreeding in the purebred population, an intercross breeding strategy was adopted in 2004, whereby the captive Columbia Basin animals were bred with pygmy rabbits of the same taxonomic classification from a population in Idaho. Intercross breeding has helped facilitate genetic restoration of the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and is considered essential for recovery efforts. An experimental reintroduction effort took place in March 2007. Based on the new information that has been generated and adaptive management measures, reintroduction efforts were resumed in spring 2011. Currently, measures to recover the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit in the wild include additional releases of the captive-bred animals, translocation and release of pygmy rabbits captured from populations outside of the Columbia Basin, and partially controlled field breeding measures. Captive breeding efforts were discontinued following the 2012 breeding season.

The Nature Conservancy and Bureau of Land Management have land acquisition and exchange programs in central Washington, which consider long-term conservation measures for the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit. In addition, the Foster Creek Conservation District is currently developing a Habitat Conservation Plan for certain private agricultural interests in Douglas County, which will facilitate conservation of shrub-steppe habitats.

The Service has cooperated with all of the above recovery efforts and contributed funding and

technical assistance through various Federal programs.

### **Why were captive breeding efforts discontinued?**

The captive breeding program and intercross strategy were undertaken primarily to preserve and stabilize the population's demographic and genetic characteristics, and these objectives have largely been met. Initially, plans to reestablish free-ranging subpopulations of pygmy rabbits within the Columbia Basin also depended entirely on using these captive-bred animals. However, for various reasons, the captive breeding program could not support anticipated reintroduction needs or sufficiently address some of the identified threats to the population, such as excessive domestication. To address this conservation challenge, actions prescribed by the recovery plan include additional releases of the captive-bred intercrossed pygmy rabbits, discontinuation of captive breeding efforts beyond 2012, translocation and release of wild pygmy rabbits from other populations, implementation of partially controlled field-breeding efforts, and improved release protocols. We believe that this new approach to recovery will maximize the likelihood of reestablishing a viable population of pygmy rabbits within the Columbia Basin by minimizing the potential for disease, domestication, and genetic drift to further affect any captive animals, while minimizing the potential for outbreeding depression and helping to address demographic limitations in the wild.

### **What areas will be considered for reintroduction efforts?**

All candidate sites identified were located on properties managed by federal, state, and/or one or more willing landowner interests. Two of the sites assessed, one in the central Moses Coulee area of southern Douglas County and one in the Beezley Hills area of northern Grant County, were identified as top priority sites to be considered for near-term recovery objectives, including initial reintroduction efforts. To date, these two sites represent the only formally identified recovery emphasis areas for the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit.

### **How can I get more information of the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit and federal recovery efforts?**

For further information on Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits or the federal recovery process, visit our website at: <http://1.usa.gov/XwYqRj> or contact Chris Warren (509-893-8020).