



# QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Final Listing and

Designation of Critical Habitat

For

Four Thurston/Pierce County Subspecies of

Mazama Pocket Gopher Under the

Endangered Species Act

April 2014



**QUESTION: Why are these four subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher being listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act?**

**ANSWER:** *These subspecies meet the criteria for being listed as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. A threatened species is a species (or subspecies) that is likely to be at the brink of extinction in the near future. The historical distribution and range for these subspecies has been considerably reduced through permanent habitat loss, and all four of these subspecies are currently facing imminent threats that place them at risk of becoming in danger of extinction in the foreseeable future. This is true throughout all or a significant portion of each subspecies' range.*

**QUESTION: What are the primary threats to the existence of these four subspecies?**

**ANSWER:** *The primary threat continues to be the loss or degradation of their habitat. The prairies upon which they depend have been lost due to conversion to agriculture, commercial and residential development, and encroachment of woody plant species. Predation by domestic cats and dogs may also be a threat, especially in remnant prairie patches that are in close proximity to development.*

**QUESTION: What is the 4(d) special rule that is included in the final listing? How will it work?**

**ANSWER:** *The Endangered Species Act contains a provision allowing for special rules to be written that allow limited, accidental harm to a listed species when those actions provide an overall greater benefit to the conservation of the species. These are known as 4(d) special rules. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has written a 4(d) special rule for certain activities that promote the maintenance of open habitat or restoration of habitat conditions necessary for the conservation of the four subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher that are found in Thurston and Pierce Counties. These include general activities conducted on agricultural and ranching lands, regular maintenance activities on civilian airports, control of noxious weeds and invasive plants, maintenance of roadside rights-of-way, and certain activities on single-family residential landowner parcels. The intent of this 4(d) special rule is to increase support for the conservation of the Mazama pocket gopher and provide an incentive for continued management activities that benefit the Olympia, Roy Prairie, Tenino, and Yelm subspecies and their habitat. See summaries of the 4(d) rule [here](#).*

**QUESTION: How is the final 4(d) special rule different than the one in the previously proposed rule?**

**ANSWER:** *Based on valuable public comment and input from Federal and State agencies, the 4(d) special rule included in our final determination has been broadened from the proposed 4(d) special rule and has increased the scope of activities and allowable timing of those activities occurring on agricultural and ranching lands, and civilian airports. The final rule also increased the scope of activities occurring on single-family residential properties; more broadly allowed the control of invasive plants and noxious weeds; and included the addition of routine vegetation management activities and fencing along roadside rights-of-way.*

**QUESTION: What is the impact of this decision on the Department of Defense's Joint Base Lewis-McChord?**

**ANSWER:** *Joint Base Lewis-McChord has been exempted from critical habitat designation where it was proposed on the base. The Service worked closely with the Department of Defense to develop an Endangered Species Management Plan for the Mazama pocket gopher on Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Joint Base Lewis-McChord demonstrated their conservation commitment through the development and implementation of this Plan, which provides the necessary assurances of protection to the Mazama pocket gopher where it occurs on the base and allows Joint Base Lewis-McChord to continue to achieve its military training objectives. Despite the exemption from critical habitat, Joint Base Lewis-McChord will continue to consult with the Service under section 7 of the Endangered Species Act for its ongoing training activities.*

**QUESTION: Is trapping of Mazama pocket gophers for the purposes of animal damage control allowed under the Endangered Species Act?**

**ANSWER:** *No. Intentionally or unintentionally trapping listed subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher is not allowed under the Endangered Species Act, even for pest control.*

*Washington state law restricts trapping or lethal control of gophers or other rodents without special permits in some areas, including gopher habitat. See <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/gophers.html#status> for more information.*

*Residents of Thurston and Pierce counties should be advised they may be in ESA-listed Mazama pocket gopher habitat. For information about the area where Mazama pocket gophers may be present in Thurston County, visit <http://www.geodata.org/website/natres/>.*

**QUESTION: Why conserve the Mazama pocket gopher and our south Puget Sound prairies?**

**ANSWER:** *Protection of the Mazama pocket gopher and the prairies provides many benefits. Mazama pocket gophers are active prairie "community members". By excavating dirt to build tunnel systems, they contribute to soil aeration, seed bed activation, soil fertilization, and regeneration of plant growth. Their burrows provide shelter for a wide variety of other native species including beetles, frogs, toads, lizards, snakes, and a number of small mammals. Mazama pocket gophers also serve as prey to other species native to Thurston and Pierce counties such as hawks and owls, snakes, coyotes and bobcats.*

The prairie habitat *Mazama* pocket gophers rely upon provides many benefits to the people living in and around Thurston and Pierce Counties; these benefits are sometimes called “ecosystem services.” Aside from providing aesthetically beautiful open landscapes, prairies play an important role in flood mitigation, ground water replenishment, detoxification and decomposition of organic waste, the cycling and moving of nutrients, the generation of clean air and carbon sequestration through photosynthesis, and recreational opportunities. Many communities surrounding prairies depend on local aquifers for fresh water. If these prairies continue to disappear, the capacity for renewing ground water will be diminished or impaired for our local communities.

**QUESTION: What is the difference between pocket gophers and moles?**

**ANSWER:** There are several varieties of both pocket gophers and moles in Washington, but the four listed subspecies of *Mazama* pocket gopher only live in Thurston and Pierce Counties.

 <p><b>Mazama pocket gopher</b> (Photo: Karen Reagan USFWS)</p>	 <p><b>Coast mole</b> (Photo: American Society of Mammalogists)</p>
 <p><b>Mazama pocket gopher mound</b> (note: irregularly shaped)</p>	 <p><b>Coast mole mound</b> (note: conical shaped)</p>

These guidelines should help you tell a gopher from a mole.

*Mazama* pocket gophers have protruding, chisel-like front teeth and grinding teeth in the rear of their jaw all of which they use to sift plant matter, like roots, out of the soil as they dig. Moles have many small sharp teeth that are shaped to catch and eat insects and worms, while *Mazama* pocket gophers have chisel-like front teeth and grinding rear teeth for eating plants and seeds. Another difference is that gophers have clearly visible eyes and ears, long whiskers, and pointed claws while moles do not have easily visible eyes and ears; moles’ front feet are broad, flat, and equipped with shovel-like claws because they push dirt out of the way instead of sifting through the soil for roots and shoots like gophers. *Mazama*

*pocket gopher noses are blunt and the nostrils are covered with tiny flaps of skin to keep dirt from getting in while mole noses are long and fleshy for hunting prey.*

*Mazama pocket gophers live in extremely well-drained soils that are associated mainly with prairies while moles live in all sorts of soil and might live in your yard if you have lots of worms and grubs. Lastly, Mazama pocket gophers tend to leave mostly irregularly shaped mounds of well-processed soils where their tunnels reach the surface. Moles tend to make mountain shaped conical mounds with the excavation hole almost right in the middle.*

**QUESTION: Are moles the only animal that people mistake for gophers?**

**ANSWER:** *No, there are a number of small mammals that may be confused with gophers for a variety of reasons. Moles are most commonly mistaken for gophers because they excavate soil and make mounds that can be confused with gopher mounds. However, there are several other small mammals that may use abandoned gopher tunnels and look like gophers, such as voles, which are smaller than Mazama pocket gophers, have larger eyes and ears, and lack long claws for digging.*



**Long-tailed vole** (Photo: Roger W. Barbour, Smithsonian Institution)

*For more complete information on Mazama pocket gophers in Washington see the websites below:*

[Card i.d. on WFWO/mpg page website](#)

<http://www.southsoundprairies.org/the-mazama-pocket-gopher/>

<http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/gophers.html>

For information on moles in Washington: <http://wdfw.wa.gov/living/moles.htm>