

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Implementation of a Captive Breeding Pilot Project for the Mount Graham Red Squirrel

Proposed Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has prepared a final environmental assessment (EA) that analyzes potential effects of a proposal to implement a captive breeding pilot project for the Mount (Mt.) Graham red squirrel (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus grahamensis*). The purpose of the proposed action is to develop captive husbandry, propagation, and release protocols for this subspecies in the event that captive breeding is determined to be needed to contribute to the recovery of the red squirrel. These actions are included in the draft first revision of the Mount Graham Red Squirrel Recovery Plan (Tasks 1.2.4, and 3.11 through 3.13).

The proposed action consists of six components: 1) pre-baiting and reconnaissance of red squirrel middens; 2) trapping and removal alive from the wild of up to 16 wild-born red squirrels; 3) transport of captured red squirrels to designated holding facilities; 4) maintenance of the red squirrels in captivity with the development of husbandry, propagation, and release protocols; 5) release of captive-born red squirrels into their historical habitat; and 6) post-release monitoring of captive-born red squirrels to assess success of the project. Components 1, 2, 5, and 6 would occur in the Pinalaño Mountains of the Coronado National Forest in Graham County, Arizona. Component 4 would occur in partner zoos (at this time, the Phoenix Zoo in Phoenix, Arizona, and the Miller Park Zoo in Bloomington, Illinois).

Alternatives Considered

The Service has analyzed two other alternatives to the proposed action in the EA:

Alternative 1: No Action

The no-action alternative would continue other Mt. Graham red squirrel recovery actions but not implement a captive breeding pilot project at this time.

Alternative 3: Captive breeding pilot project with up to eight Mount Graham red squirrels

This alternative is the same as the preferred alternative with the exception that only eight wild-born red squirrels would be captured for the pilot program.

Decision and Rationale

The proposed action was selected over the other two alternatives because it would implement the recovery actions in the most effective way possible. Under the no-action alternative, implementation of the captive breeding pilot project would be indefinitely delayed (the original decision to proceed with this project is from 2006) and might not come to pass in the future if our existing partners can no longer support the project. Since the publication of the draft EA in

2010, two partners (Reid Park Zoo and the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Arizona) have cancelled their preliminary commitments to this project. Alternative 3 using only eight wild-born red squirrels was not selected since the lower number of animals to be collected reduced the opportunities to create the captive breeding population in the event of deaths of captured individuals and that having fewer pairs of breeding adults meant fewer captive-born juveniles to be released and monitored. Mount Graham red squirrels produce an average of two young a year and since breeding protocols and production of young have yet to be attempted, optimizing the number of breeding adults would enable more thorough implementation and testing of release techniques. The capture of 16 Mt. Graham red squirrels is not expected to affect the viability of the wild population.

The proposed action and Alternative 3 both implement the recovery tasks; however we believe the proposed action has the higher potential for successful implementation of the pilot project and determination of the future value of a captive breeding program for this species.

Effects of the Selected Alternative

Implementation of the proposed action will benefit the Mt. Graham red squirrel through the evaluation of additional tools (captive breeding and release techniques) to support recovery of the species.

The adverse effects of the proposed action, described in the final EA, will be short-term, minor, and of low intensity.

- The potential impacts to the wild red squirrel population are minor and relate to the number of wild-born individuals that could be removed to captivity. No more than 16 red squirrels could be removed, and, if survival of red squirrels in captivity is high, removal of all 16 might not occur. Also, not all 16 would be removed in one year (current holding capacity is for six individuals), reducing the effect on any one cohort.
- The design of the project to avoid areas of human development in the Pinaleno Mountains results in minimal effects to existing land uses including recreation, other scientific research (operations of the Mt. Graham International Observatory), and forest-management practices.
- There are no effects to soils and geology, vegetation communities, and cultural and historical resources. No comments on the proposed action were received from Tribes with cultural connections to the Pinaleno Mountains.
- Implementation of the pilot project will not violate any Federal, state, or local laws or requirements imposed for the protection of the environment. The proposed action will not have any effects on wetlands or floodplains pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988 because there are no ground-disturbing activities proposed.

Public Involvement and Coordination

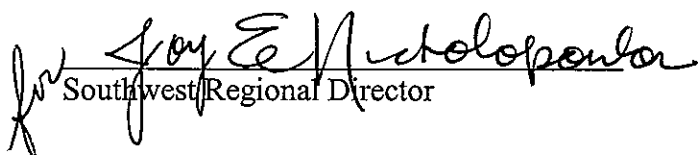
The proposed action has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. The initial impetus for this project came from the Technical Committee of the Mt. Graham Red Squirrel Recovery Team (Recovery Team), which is composed of representatives from the U.S.

Forest Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Arizona State University, University of Arizona, and the Yavapai-Apache Tribe (representing the southern Arizona Tribes). Since the Recovery Team represents all the potentially affect parties, additional public scoping was not deemed to be necessary to identify issues of concern in going forward with NEPA compliance.

The draft EA was made available for public review and comment for a 30-day period which began September 10, 2010. Comments were received from seven individuals or groups. The letters of comment and responses to the comments are included in an appendix to the final EA. The final EA was prepared to reflect responses to comments.

Decision

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposed action does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. An environmental assessment has been prepared in support of this finding and is available upon request from the Arizona Ecological Services Office, 2321 W. Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, AZ 85021, (602) 242-0210. The EA is also available on-line at: <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/> in the Documents by Species folder for the Mt. Graham red squirrel.

 Southwest Regional Director _____
Date 8/6/13