



# News Release

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[www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/)

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## **Fish and Wildlife Service Considers Managed Breeding Pilot Program for Mount Graham Red Squirrels** -Public Comments Sought-

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking input on a plan to conduct a pilot managed breeding program for the endangered Mt. Graham red squirrel at the Phoenix Zoo's Conservation Center. The project is being considered per a recommendation by the multi-agency Mount Graham Red Squirrel Recovery Team, including the Coronado National Forest, Arizona Game and Fish Department, University of Arizona, Native American tribes and others.

The 10-year pilot project would develop husbandry, rearing, and breeding methods for the Mt. Graham red squirrel, as well as techniques for release of squirrels into the wild, and establish an assurance population of squirrels outside of Mt. Graham that could serve as a buffer in the event of future wildfire within the habitat in the Pinaleño Mountains or other causes of catastrophic decline of Mt. Graham red squirrels in the wild.

Developing propagation techniques and release protocols for this subspecies would answer questions and provide data that can be used to inform the execution of a full breeding program in the future, should the Recovery Team determine such a program is necessary to recover the squirrel. Husbandry and release requirements for this subspecies are currently unknown.

"This pilot project will provide much needed information on the feasibility of rearing Mt. Graham red squirrels while potentially providing a reserve population of squirrels that could be crucial in the event of a catastrophic loss of squirrels in the Pinaleño Mountains," said Steve Spangle, the Service's Arizona field supervisor. "If the pilot program is successful, it will provide another tool in recovering this highly endangered species."

Starting as early as fall 2010, up to 16, preferably juvenile, Mt. Graham red squirrels would be captured and transported to the Phoenix Zoo Conservation and Science Center where a rearing facility has been established. Offspring born at the Conservation Center would eventually be returned to selected locations on the mountain utilizing different release techniques to determine which of those provide for the greatest survival of repatriated squirrels.

Phoenix Zoo has a legacy of involvement in native species conservation efforts and works with state and government agencies on several native species conservation programs. The Phoenix Zoo Conservation and Science Center will coordinate the development of a propagation program for Mr. Graham red squirrels. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA), through its Rodent, Insectivore and Lagomorph Advisory Group, has named Stuart Wells, Director of Conservation and Science at Phoenix Zoo, as the manager of the AZA

population management program for Mt. Graham red squirrel. The Population Manager also coordinates the work of other accredited zoological institutions that may join in the effort to breed this species. “We look forward to providing assistance in this important effort to offset the decline of Mt. Graham red squirrels,” said Wells.

Mt. Graham red squirrels occur only in the Pinaleno Mountains in southeastern Arizona. They are threatened by habitat loss due to native and exotic forest insect infestations, large-scale wildfires and human factors (e.g., disturbance, conversion to roads, trails, and/or recreation sites, permitted special uses, etc.); and loss or reduction of food sources due to drought, predation, and apparent dietary and territory competition with Abert’s squirrels, which were introduced in the 1940s.

Midden (squirrel food caches) surveys used to determine squirrel population numbers showed increasing numbers of Mt. Graham red squirrels into 1998-2000, with peaks over 500, after which the population declined. Population estimates dropped in 2001 to less than 250; since that time, population estimates have remained fairly stable, varying from approximately 200 to 350.

Comments are being sought through October 12, 2010, on a draft environmental assessment for the project. The assessment is available at <http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes/>. Copies are also available by calling (602) 242-0210 or visiting the Arizona Ecological Services Office in Phoenix (2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Ariz. 85021) or the Service’s Tucson Suboffice (201 North Bonita Avenue, Suite 141, Tucson, Ariz. 85745). Comments should be addressed to Marit Alanen, at the Arizona Ecological Services Office’s Phoenix address. Written comments may be sent by facsimile to (602) 242-2513 or by email to [marit\\_alanen@fws.gov](mailto:marit_alanen@fws.gov).

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