



News Release

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office
2321 W. Royal Palm Road, Suite 103
Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602/242-0210
602/242-2513 (Fax)

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office

www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/

For Release: June 17, 2011

Contact: Jeff Humphrey (602) 242-0210 x222

Four Endangered Mount Graham Red Squirrels to be Collected as Insurance Against Wildfire

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has initiated an attempt to collect and hold four endangered Mount Graham red squirrels as an emergency measure to guard against the loss of the entire subspecies due to the imminent threat of destruction of its remaining habitat by potential wildfire.

Mount Graham red squirrels occur only in the Pinaleno Mountains in southeastern Arizona. Conditions in the Pinalenos are currently drier and more fire prone than they were prior to the 29,200-acre Nuttall Complex Wildfire and 6,700-acre Clark Peak Fire that burned squirrel habitat in 2004 and 1996. Meteorologists predict at least four dry lightning events could hit the Pinalenos before the monsoon season brings rain. Once a fire begins, the one road leading in and out of the Pinalenos – Swift Trail – will be closed to all but fire crews, rendering it too late to rescue any squirrels. The Coronado National Forest is currently closed to public access due to fire conditions.

Two male and two female squirrels will be trapped and removed from the mountain. Squirrels are presently caring for young, so the Service will seek out non-lactating females to avoid breaking up nests. Staff is en route and trapping will be conducted over the weekend and will continue until four squirrels are captured or unless fire interrupts efforts.

Collected squirrels will be immediately transported to the Arthur L. and Elaine V. Johnson Foundation Conservation Center at the Phoenix Zoo where they will be cared for to guard against extinction in the event that a wildfire eliminates the wild population. If necessary, these squirrels and their offspring could serve as a seed population for restoring the species in the wild.

This emergency action to prevent extinction is not associated with the Service's 2010 proposal to conduct a pilot program to investigate the feasibility of holding, breeding and rearing Mount Graham red squirrels in captivity. The Service has yet to make a final determination on the pilot program, which would involve the Phoenix Zoo and Miller Park Zoo in Bloomington, Ill. If the Service approves the pilot program, squirrels collected under this emergency will be considered for inclusion into the husbandry experiment.

Fall 2010 midden (squirrel food caches) surveys put the number of squirrels at approximately 214 animals. Habitat losses caused by fire and insect infestations, drought, poor cone crops and competition with the introduced Abert's squirrel are considered primary factors threatening the species.

Because this collection of squirrels is an emergency, the Service will complete Endangered Species Act compliance at a later date.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals, and commitment to public service. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service works cooperatively with the American public to continue the conservation legacy of America's great outdoors. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/usfws, follow our tweets at www.twitter.com/usfwshq, watch our YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/usfws> and download photos from our Flickr page at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/usfwshq>.

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/>

NOTE TO EDITORS:

The Coronado National Forest is closed to public access and this emergency action is being conducted under special permission. This is an emergency activity – media access to the collection site and quarantined facility at the Phoenix Zoo will not be permitted.

Photographs of the Mount Graham red squirrel are available by contacting Jeff Humphrey (602-242-0210) or on the Internet at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/Mammals.htm> and http://digitalmedia.fws.gov/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/natdiglib&CISOPTR=5682&CISOBX=1&REC=3.