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Endangered Mount Graham Red Squirrels Find Refuge at Phoenix Zoo as Precautionary Measure Against Threat of Wildfires

PHOENIX (July 18, 2011) – The Phoenix Zoo announced today they have received four Mount Graham red squirrels to be held at the Zoo as a refugium population in the event of a catastrophic wildfire on Mount Graham.

With the recent outbreak of fires across much of the state of Arizona, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service implemented an emergency action to trap four Mount Graham red squirrels. If necessary, these squirrels and their offspring could serve as a seed population for restoring the species in the wild.

“After several days of hard work, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and Arizona Game and Fish Department biologists were able to trap two males and two females for interim housing at the Phoenix Zoo,” says Marit Alanen, lead biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “The Phoenix Zoo’s Arthur L. and Elaine V. Johnson Foundation Native Species Conservation Center is an ideal location for these squirrels to be cared for during the peak fire season.”

Currently, the squirrels are settling in well at their temporary habitat at the Phoenix Zoo’s climate controlled and comfortable Conservation Center. “We are honored to be entrusted by USFWS to provide care and refuge for these delicate animals during this peak wildfire season,” says Stuart Wells, Director of Conservation and Science for the Phoenix Zoo.

“The Phoenix Zoo has a legacy of involvement in native species conservation efforts and works with state and federal agencies on several native species conservation programs. This effort is no exception.”

The Pinaleno Mountains, which include Mount Graham, are home to the only population of Mount Graham red squirrels, a subspecies that has been listed as endangered since 1987. The most recent survey (conducted last fall) resulted in a population estimate of 214 animals, which was down from 249 the year before. Habitat losses caused by fire and insect infestations, drought, poor cone crops and competition with the introduced Abert’s squirrel are some of the main factors causing their decline.

When this emergency action was being considered conditions in the Pinalenos were 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 had predicted 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.

In an unrelated project, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering a [pilot breeding program](#) for the Mount Graham red squirrel. Depending on the outcome of that process, the four collected squirrels could remain at the Zoo to participate in that program, or may be held and returned to Mount Graham once the fire danger has passed. Phoenix Zoo Conservation and Science Director Wells worked with USFWS officials to develop the pilot breeding program, and if the program is approved, would help coordinate breeding and release research.

Short videos of the capture of the Mount Graham red squirrel can be found [here](#).

About the Phoenix Zoo

The Phoenix Zoo is a non-profit zoological park that serves 1.5 million guests annually. Home to more than 1,300 animals and many endangered and threatened species, the Zoo is dedicated to providing experiences that inspire people and motivate them to care for the natural world. For more information about the Zoo and upcoming events visit phoenixzoo.org.