

Finding of No Significant Impact

Release of Captive-reared Florida Grasshopper Sparrows to the Dry Prairie, Florida

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to release of captive-reared Florida grasshopper sparrows (*Ammodramus savannarum floridanus*; FGSP) to the dry prairie region of Florida to supplement the wild population for the purpose of arresting the current decline and stabilizing the wild population, and potentially increasing the wild population. This proposed action supports the recovery efforts for the species and the ultimate goal of down listing or delisting the species.

The FGSP population has been in sharp decline despite intensive management and threat mitigation, and the current known wild population is estimated to be less than 80 individuals. As breeding pairs reached critically low numbers in 2015, the Service began a captive-breeding program to augment the wild population via captive-reared birds. Since that time, the program has developed and solidified protocols that have resulted in increased breeding success. Given the success of captive breeding with FGSP, the Service and the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), with input and feedback of the FGSP Working Group, propose to release captive-reared FGSP back onto the Florida dry prairie to supplement the wild population. Releases are just one of a suite of actions identified in the *Florida Grasshopper Sparrow 5-Year Strategic Vision* (Vision; Service and FWC 2019), which outlines the agencies' 5-year plan to grow the wild population through habitat management, wild population management, and captive rearing and release, while identifying management actions that can reverse the population decline and reduce and eventually eliminate the need for future captive rearing.

The environmental assessment for the proposed action evaluated four alternatives for releasing FGSP to satisfy the Service's goal. Alternatives Considered: (1) no action; (2) release FGSP into the current extant range (3) release FGSP into the historic unoccupied range, (4) release into extant range after additional pathogen identification and testing has been completed.

Alternative 3 was considered but not studied in detail. The remainder of the historic range has been largely converted to other land uses or has overgrown dry prairie and semi-improved pasture, which requires more intensive habitat management in order to provide appropriate conditions for FGSP. Further, we posit that under the current management regime that the habitat supporting the extant population is of sufficient quantity and quality to support enough additional FGSP to fulfill the objectives of this action.

The option of No Action is unacceptable when the mandate of the Endangered Species Act, to protect and recover endangered species, is considered. The most compelling reason for not delaying the releases is the precipitous decline of the species and potential for extinction within a decade.

Although Alternative 4 would benefit the wild population by introducing FGSP to halt the decline and prevent extinction, the unknown temporal component of Alternative 4 introduces potential negative impacts compared with the Preferred Alternative. We have no way to reasonably predict how long the necessary analysis would take and what would be the status of the wild population at the time releases could commence, if ever. In addition, without immediate action, the ability to collect wild samples and confirm pathogen presence from this declining population would likely make this alternative unattainable. Furthermore, delaying releases is expected to increase the magnitude of the captive breeding effort necessary to keep the wild population from becoming extirpated. Thus, the benefit of obtaining additional information about the pathogen is offset by the delays in the ability to implement the proposed releases in a timely manner and halt the population decline.

Alternative 2 was the preferred alternative and is the selected course of action. This alternative was selected because it most expeditiously addresses the goal to halt the decline and prevent extinction. This alternative is not expected to result in any significant affects to the human environment, including resident wildlife. Of greatest concern when evaluating alternatives was the potential to release captive-reared birds with a pathogen that was novel to the dry prairie and would cause morbidity and mortality to the wild FGSP population or other bird species. To assess this risk, the FGSP program initiated disease studies, conducted a disease risk analysis with International Union for Conservation of Nature/ Species Survival Commission Conservation Planning Specialist Group (IUCN/SSC), convened a health team to advise the Service and FWC, and incorporated a standard health screen for all birds prior to release.

In summary, there is not agreement that release of FGSP is without risk because there are still unknowns about the pathogenicity of the coccidia present in FGSP. However, it is expected that the birds in captivity do not carry any pathogen unique or novel from birds in the wild based on biosecurity measures in place at both captive breeding facilities. While releases are never without risk, the environmental and/or health impacts to FGSP or other avian species from the proposed action are not expected to be significant.

Based on my review and evaluation of the enclosed Environmental Assessment and other supporting documentation, I have determined that the implementation of Alternative 2, the release of FGSP into the current extant range, is not a major Federal Action which would significantly affect the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

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