

Mazama Pocket Gophers in Western Washington – Frequently Asked Questions

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What are pocket gophers?

In some areas, the name “gopher” and/or “pocket gopher” is commonly applied to a variety of mammals including ground squirrels and moles. However, true pocket gophers are burrowing small mammals that get their name from their fur-lined cheek pouches, or pockets. These pockets are used for carrying food.

Two species of pocket gophers occur in Washington: the *Northern* pocket gopher is the most widespread, occupying much of eastern Washington. The *Mazama* pocket gopher is the only pocket gopher in most of western Washington—on the Olympic Peninsula and in the southern Puget Sound area.

There are 7 subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher currently found in Thurston, Pierce, Clallam, Mason, and Wahkiakum counties in Washington State. Another subspecies of pocket gopher was historically found in and around Tacoma, but that subspecies is presumed to be extinct. The federally-listed Olympia, Tenino, and Yelm pocket gophers are only found in Thurston County and the Roy Prairie pocket gopher is only found in Pierce County. In 2016, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) completed a genetic study of pocket gophers in the south Puget Sound area. The study supports the determination that the Mazama pocket gophers found in Thurston County are distinct subspecies.

What is the current legal status of the four listed Mazama pocket gopher subspecies (Roy Prairie, Olympia, Tenino, and Yelm) found in Thurston and Pierce counties?

Four subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher found in Thurston and Pierce counties were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended (ESA) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) in April 2014.

A federally threatened species is a species (or subspecies) that is likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future. “Endangered” means that a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. The historical distribution and range for the federally-listed subspecies has been considerably reduced through permanent habitat loss, and all four of these subspecies are currently facing imminent threats that place them at risk of becoming endangered in the foreseeable future.

Prior to federal listing, the Mazama pocket gopher was also listed by the State of Washington as a threatened species in 2006. State law defines a “threatened species” as, “*any wildlife species native to the State ... that is likely to become an endangered species in the foreseeable future ... without cooperative management or removal of threats*” (WAC 232-12-297). As a result, all sub-species of Mazama pocket gopher found in Washington including the four federally listed subspecies are currently State listed. In response to the State’s listing of Mazama pocket gopher, both Thurston and Pierce Counties have each established Critical Areas Ordinances to provide some protections for the species.

The Counties conduct reviews of County permit requests to comply with state and federal laws (including the ESA) and to protect the County and its permit holders from liability under these laws.

Why were four subspecies of Mazama pocket gophers protected under the Endangered Species Act?

The USFWS received a petition to consider protection of eight subspecies of Mazama pocket gophers under the ESA. This required that the USFWS conduct a thorough scientific review of the status of the eight subspecies and any threats to their continued existence.

In conducting our analysis, the USFWS reviewed the status of the eight Mazama pocket gopher subspecies in Washington State (Olympic pocket gopher, Shelton pocket gopher, Tacoma pocket gopher, Roy pocket gopher, Olympia pocket gopher, Tenino pocket gopher, Yelm pocket gopher, and Cathlamet pocket gopher). The USFWS determined that the Tacoma pocket gopher was presumed extinct, and that three other subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher (Olympic pocket gopher, Shelton pocket gopher, and Cathlamet pocket gopher) did not warrant ESA protection. Consideration of best available science and public comment led USFWS to determine that four subspecies warranted ESA protection: Roy pocket gopher (*Thomomys mazama glacialis*); Olympia pocket gopher (*Thomomys mazama pugetensis*); Tenino pocket gopher (*Thomomys mazama tumuli*); and Yelm pocket gopher (*Thomomys mazama yelmensis*). Our findings published in the Federal Register can be found [here](https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-04-09/pdf/2014-07414.pdf): <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2014-04-09/pdf/2014-07414.pdf>.

What are threats to the existence of these four subspecies?

The main threat continues to be the loss or degradation of their prairie habitat. The prairies upon which they depend have largely been lost due to conversion to agriculture, commercial and residential development, and encroachment of woody plants. Predation by feral and domestic cats and dogs may also be a threat, especially in remnant prairie patches that are in close proximity to development. Additional threats include small population effects caused by habitat fragmentation, impacts from trapping and poisoning, and some forms of military training (Roy Prairie and Yelm subspecies only).

Loss of prairie habitat impacts many prairie-dependent species. In addition to four subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher, several other prairie species are listed under the ESA, including streaked horned lark, golden paintbrush, and Taylor's checkerspot butterfly.

What does the federal listing of the Mazama gopher as threatened mean to private landowners?

Under the ESA, Mazama pocket gophers in Thurston and Pierce counties are protected from "take," which under federal law means to "harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct." Take may also include significant habitat modification or degradation if it kills or injures wildlife by significantly impairing essential activities of the animals including breeding, feeding, or sheltering. Therefore, if a landowner proposes activities that would result in take of the listed subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher, the landowners will need to obtain authorization for take prior to moving forward with their activity.

Some take has already been authorized for private landowners through a 4(d) rule. Recognizing that certain activities promote the maintenance of open habitat or restoration of habitat conditions necessary for the conservation of Mazama pocket gopher the USFWS finalized a special rule under section 4(d) of the ESA (4(d) Rule). The 4(d) Rule promotes general activities conducted on agricultural

and ranching lands, regular maintenance activities on civilian airports, control of noxious weeds and invasive plants, maintenance of roadside rights-of-way, and certain activities on single-family residential landowner parcels. The intent of the 4(d) Rule is incentivize continued management activities that benefit the Roy Prairie, Olympia, Tenino, and Yelm subspecies and their habitat, especially farming, ranching, and civilian airport maintenance activities.

You can find more information about the landowner protections under the 4(d) Rule here:

https://www.fws.gov/wafwo/documents/4dSummary%20pages_FINAL_PDF.pdf

How does a private landowner know if they need to obtain authorization for take prior to moving forward with a proposed activity?

Some incidental take has already been authorized for private landowners through a 4(d) rule. More information about activities on single-family residential properties allowed under this rule can be found here: https://www.fws.gov/wafwo/documents/4dSummary%20pages_FINAL_PDF.pdf

If the proposed activity is not included in the 4(d) rule, a private landowner should contact their permitting entity. The permitting entity may suggest engaging a consultant that has completed the USFWS-provided gopher screening protocol training.

What is a Habitat Conservation Plan and how could it help promote economic growth and development while protecting federally-listed Mazama pocket gophers?

A Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) is a planning document that is required as part of an application for an incidental take permit. Federal law requires an incidental take permit if otherwise lawful activities result in “take” of a federally-listed wildlife species. The incidental take permit allows the permit-holder to legally proceed with an activity that results in the take of a listed species and/or their habitat. In developing HCPs, applicants describe measures designed to minimize and mitigate the effects of their actions— to ensure that species will be conserved and to contribute to their recovery while allowing their activity to proceed.

HCPs can apply to both listed and non-listed species, including those that are could become federally listed in the future. Conserving species before they are in danger of extinction or are likely to become so can also provide early benefits and prevent the need for listing. If applicants choose to include non-listed species as part of their HCP, they are protected from additional regulatory requirements if that species becomes protected under the ESA in the future.

Entities such as Thurston County voluntarily apply for incidental take permits. The types of activities to be covered, quantity of take requested, design of the Habitat Conservation Plan program, associated cost to implement over the permit duration, and method for funding these activities are all determined by the permit applicant and described in the HCP application provided to the USFWS. Since 2011, the USFWS has been providing technical assistance and federal funding to Thurston County as they develop an HCP that will outline a new County permitting process that balances conservation needs for multiple federally listed species including Mazama pocket gopher with continued economic growth and development in the County. The County may also choose to include protections for non-listed species that also depend on prairie habitats for their continued existence. The permit will likely be for 30 or more years and therefore provide predictability to individuals seeking County permits. A completed HCP will not only provide conservation benefits for federally listed species and other prairie species, it will

allow the County to implement projects and issue development permits, providing continued economic viability without exposing the County or its permit holders to legal liability under the ESA.

To learn more about the Thurston County Habitat Conservation Planning process, please visit:

<http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/permitting/gopher-reviews/gopher-reviews-hcp.html>

In other parts of the state and country, “gophers” and/or “pocket gophers” are sometimes considered pests, and are even controlled by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). What makes the four federally-listed Mazama pocket gophers different?

The four federally-listed subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher native to Thurston and Pierce Counties, Washington, are not the same subspecies of "gophers" and/or "pocket gophers" that are controlled by USDA in other areas of the State or country. Unfortunately, the use of general common names (e.g., "gopher" or "pocket gopher") for these small mammals does not always allow the distinction of the various species and subspecies when appropriate.

The USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has information on their website for pocket gopher damage management to alert the public that management methods described may not be legal in areas with federally listed pocket gophers. USDA APHIS has provided a link to our web page on federally-listed Mazama pocket gophers (<https://www.fws.gov/wafwo/articles.cfm?id=149489588>) to alert the public to the protected status, and therefore prohibition against take, for these protected subspecies.

In recognition of the protected status of the state- or federally-listed Mazama pocket gopher subspecies, USDA APHIS, working closely with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), has also recently approved revisions to strychnine product labelling to clarify that strychnine is not to be used in the ranges of state- or federally-protected subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher in Washington State. It is important to note that already-labeled stocks of strychnine may still be distributed for 18 months following this approval.

What efforts are currently underway to conserve Mazama pocket gophers?

Preserving and restoring historic and existing Mazama pocket gopher habitat is essential for the recovery of these subspecies: loss and degradation of their habitat was the main reason they were state- and federally-listed. Because of the close association the Roy Prairie, Olympia, Tenino, and Yelm pocket gophers have with specific kinds of soils and vegetation, it is very important to conserve and restore this habitat. Since 2005, Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) has worked with the Center for Natural Lands Management (CNLM) to enhance and manage thousands of acres of prairie occupied by the Roy Prairie and Yelm pocket gopher. Restoration and management of prairie habitats has also been initiated on some of the public lands where pocket gophers persist in Thurston County, such as the Scatter Creek and West Rocky Prairie Wildlife Areas (owned and managed by WDFW), Rocky Prairie Natural Area Preserve (owned and managed by Washington Department of Natural Resources). Prairie conservation on private lands has been assisted through the Grassland Reserve Program which provides easement agreements through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service. The USFWS continues to work with the WDFW and Thurston County to develop a county-wide Habitat Conservation Plan, which will allow for economic growth and development while still conserving prairie habitat and associated species.

How do Mazama pocket gophers and prairies contribute to our local ecological health and community well-being?

Meeting the requirements of federal law means that all of us – USFWS, other federal agencies, as well as state, local, and tribal governments and private citizens – work together to recover species protected by the ESA. Protection of federally-listed subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher and prairies provides many benefits to our remaining prairie habitats. Mazama pocket gophers are productive prairie “community members.” By excavating dirt to build tunnel systems, they contribute to soil aeration, seed bed activation, soil fertilization, and regeneration of plant growth. Their burrows provide shelter for a wide variety of other native species including beetles, frogs, toads, lizards, snakes, and a number of small mammals. Mazama pocket gophers also serve as prey to other species native to Thurston and Pierce counties such as hawks and owls, snakes, coyotes and bobcats.

The prairie habitat the four federally-listed Mazama pocket gophers rely upon also provides many benefits to the people living in and around Thurston and Pierce Counties. Aside from providing aesthetically beautiful open landscapes, prairies play an important role in flood control, ground water replenishment, cycling and moving of nutrients, generation of clean air and carbon sequestration through photosynthesis, and recreational opportunities. Many communities surrounding prairies depend on local aquifers for fresh water. If these prairies continue to disappear, the capacity for renewing ground water will be diminished or impaired for our local communities. As indicated in our 4(d) Rule, prairie conservation goes hand-in-hand with preservation of working lands. South Puget Sound farms and ranches provide good jobs, and healthy local food, and can provide habitat for Mazama pocket gophers and other plants and animals that rely on prairie habitats for their continued existence.