



# United States Department of the Interior



## FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

Washington Fish and Wildlife Office  
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Lacey, Washington 98503

### INFORMATIONAL MEMO

December 10, 2012

**SUBJECT:** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to extend Endangered Species Act protection to four subspecies of *Mazama* pocket gopher and their habitats.

**BACKGROUND:** The *Mazama* pocket gopher is a species of small mammal that occupies prairie habitats in Washington and Oregon although today's announcement affects only the subspecies found in Washington. They rarely surface, instead reaching their food from beneath, chewing away roots and pulling plants underground. When foraging above the surface, the gophers cut plants and use fur-lined cheek pouches (their "pockets") to transport them underground where they are stored for later use as food or bedding. This plant material and the gopher's feces, which are packed away into side tunnels, keeping transit and foraging tunnels clean, serve as fertilizer and seed beds for the prairies overhead.

*Mazama* pocket gophers (*Thomomys mazama*) are found on the grasslands of south Puget Sound, on subalpine meadows of the northern Olympic Peninsula, and on lowland prairies and meadows in Mason and Wahkiakum counties. The prairies of south Puget Sound and western Oregon are part of one of the rarest ecosystems in the United States. Dramatic changes have occurred on the landscape over the last 150 years, including a 90 to 95 percent reduction in the prairie ecosystem. In the south Puget Sound region, where most of western Washington's prairies historically occurred, less than 10 percent of the original prairie persists, and only 3 percent remains dominated by native vegetation. Since the mid-1800s much of Washington's Puget prairie habitat has been lost through conversion to human uses such as development or agriculture, or to invasive species or encroachment of woody plants resulting primarily from fire suppression. Only the *Mazama* pocket gopher subspecies found in Washington are considered in this rule.

. Today's announcement proposes listing only the four subspecies (*T.m.yelmensis*, *T.m. glacialis*, *T.m. tumuli*, and *T.m. pugetensis*) found in Thurston and Pierce counties, Washington. Four other subspecies (*T.m. melanops*, *T.m. couchi*, *T.m. tacomensis*, *T.m. louiei*) do not require the protection of the ESA. A fifth subspecies, *T.m. douglasii*, was determined to be part of a larger group of animals and do not require the protection of the ESA at this time.

### **PROPOSAL:**

The Service is proposing to list the four cited *Mazama* pocket gopher subspecies as threatened. The announcement also proposes the designation of 9,234 acres of Critical Habitat for the *Mazama* pocket gopher.

### **4(D) RULE –SPECIAL RULE:**

The ESA contains a provision allowing for special rules to be written that allow limited incidental take of listed species under specified conditions. These are known as 4(d) rules for the section of the ESA that allows them.

In the case of the four subspecies of *Mazama* pocket gopher, the Service is also proposing a special rule that would allow limited incidental take of individual animals during the course of maintenance activities at civilian airports, certain types of agricultural practices, and many typical activities conducted on small private landholdings.

If you have questions or need addition information about the Service's proposal, a copy and information about the subspecies involved is available on the USFWS website at <http://www.fws.gov/wafwo/> . The proposal will be open for public comment for 60 days ending XXXX. Please see the proposal to learn how comments may be provided to the Service. The Service may take up to one year following the date of the proposal to make a final determination on the status of the subspecies and their habitats.