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# News Release



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## **Service Proposes to Protect Mazama Pocket Gopher Under the Endangered Species Act**

### *Agency Seeks Information from the Public, Scientific Community before Making Final Decision*

Current evidence suggests that four of nine subspecies of the Mazama pocket gopher may become threatened with extinction in the foreseeable future, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. As a result, the Service has proposed to protect the four subspecies under the Endangered Species Act, and is seeking new information from the public and the scientific community that will assist the agency in making a final determination.

The Service also is proposing a special rule to exempt the “take” of ESA-listed Mazama pocket gophers associated with civilian airport maintenance and operation, specific activities conducted by small private landowners and agriculture management. The exemption means anyone engaged in those permitted activities would not be held responsible if the activities harm members of the subspecies.

Today’s announcement also proposes the designation of 9,234 acres of Critical Habitat for the four subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher in western Washington. The Service now has up to one year to determine whether the subspecies status and critical habitat in today’s announcement should become final.

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 spend the majority of their time underground in a series of tunnels from which they forage on grasses and forbs. 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 for the prairies overhead while their mounds become surface seed beds.

In Washington, the species (*Thomomys mazama*) is 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. Today’s announcement proposes listing only the four subspecies (*T.m.yelmensis*, *T.m.glacialis*, *T.m.tumuli*, and *T.m.pugetensis*) found on the south Puget Sound grasslands of Thurston and Pierce counties, Washington. In addition, we have determined that the Tacoma pocket gopher (*T.m*

*tacomensis*) is extinct, and that the listing of three other subspecies of Mazama pocket gopher (*T.m melanops*, *T.m. couchi*, , *T.m. louiei*) is not warranted. A fifth subspecies, *T.m. douglasii*, has been determined to be part of a larger group of animals and does not require ESA protection at this time.

The Service first identified the Mazama pocket gopher as a candidate for ESA protection in 2001, due to the threat posed by habitat loss and fragmentation caused by human development, agricultural practices, and encroachment of invasive plants species resulting from fire suppression practices.

The final decision to add the Mazama pocket gopher to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants will be based on the best scientific information available. The Service will open a 60-day public comment period on December 11, 2012 to allow the public to review and comment on the proposal and provide additional information. All relevant information received from the public, government agencies, the scientific community, industry, or any other interested parties will be considered and addressed in the agency's final listing determination for the species.

Today's decision is part of the Service's efforts to implement a court-approved work plan that resolves a series of lawsuits concerning the agency's ESA Listing Program. The intent of the agreement is to significantly reduce litigation-driven workloads and allow the agency to focus its resources on the species most in need of the ESA's protections over the next five years.

A copy of today's proposal and other information about the subspecies involved is available on the USFWS Pacific region website at <http://www.fws.gov/wafwo> . The proposal is open for public comment for 60 days. Comments may be sent electronically through the Federal eRulmaking portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Submit your comments to Docket No. FWS-R1-ES-2012-0088. You may also submit hard copy comments by U.S. Mail or hand delivery to: Public Comments Processing. Attn: FWS-R1-ES-2012-0088; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS2042-PDM, Arlington, VA 22203. All comments must be received by February 8, 2013.

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