

PYGMY RABBIT REINTRODUCTION UPDATE
MARCH 2012

- **Wild Rabbit Translocations**

Pygmy rabbit trapping in Nevada and Utah was very successful with a total of 47 rabbits translocated from the two states. Throughout the capture efforts, USFWS and WDFW shuttle crews from Washington helped transport the animals to 6-acre and 10-acre enclosures at WDFW's Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area (WLA) within approximately 48 hours of being captured.



Rabbit in transport bin with sagebrush and lettuce



Jon Gallie, WDFW, transporting a load of rabbits



Tammy Ash, USFWS, holding a pygmy rabbit during a veterinary check

The new rabbits joined captive-bred pygmy rabbits placed in the enclosures last year, rabbits born in the large enclosures last June and wild rabbits translocated from Oregon and Nevada last October. Breeding season should be under way soon and we hope that this intermingling of pygmy rabbits from multiple sources will result in many kits born this year.

Nevada:

During March 4th-13th, our trapping team camped in a borrowed BLM trailer in Ely and in beautiful Butte Valley. We captured 23 pygmy rabbits from Elko and White Pine Counties in Nevada (6F:17M). Nevada Department of Wildlife's Rory Lamp, Pete Bradley and Brad Bauman were invaluable to our efforts, providing reconnaissance information, as well as camping and trapping each day with our crew in Butte Valley. Two pygmy rabbit males were placed at the Oregon Zoo temporarily to contribute to the 2012 captive breeding effort, one individual died en route (likely capture myopathy), and 20 rabbits were released into large enclosures on Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area.



Elizabeth Rodrick and Jon Gallie, WDFW, trapping in Steptoe Valley, NV



Chad Eidson, WDFW, setting a trap in a rabbit burrow



Pygmy rabbit habitat in Butte Valley, NV

Utah:

During March 16th-21st, 24 pygmy rabbits were translocated from Utah (11F:13M), with 13 animals taken from Piute and Wayne Counties and 11 animals taken from Rich County. Four additional animals were trapped but then immediately released since we had reached our agreed upon capture limits for that area. During trapping days in Piute and Wayne counties we camped in a borrowed BLM trailer. While working in Rich County, we stayed across the border in Wyoming's Fossil Butte National Monument where the NPS let us use their bunkhouse facility. At the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, Dr. John Shivik, Keith Day and Riley Peck went above and beyond to ensure our success in Utah. In addition, Brigham Young University's Dr. Randy Larsen, Robert Edgel and Janet Lee, along with a group of student volunteers also provided a lot of help with logistics and fieldwork. Twenty-two pygmy rabbits were successfully released into the large enclosures on Sagebrush Flat Wildlife Area, while two individuals died in transit (likely capture myopathy). Additional measures to prevent mortalities taken on-the-fly included discontinuing chasing rabbits into burrows (employed successfully by our BYU counterparts, but which likely increases capture stress) and minimizing handling time with a single event to work up the animals at the cooperating veterinarian offices.



Chad Eidson and David Volsen, WDFW remove a pygmy rabbit from the trap



Chris Warren, USFWS, sets a trap in Utah



Pygmy rabbit habitat in Piute County, Utah

- Large Enclosure Rabbits

The large enclosures successfully maintained rabbits over the winter season. Over-winter survival seemed relatively low with 11 individuals estimated to remain in mid-March 2012 from the 47 accounted for in November 2011. However, the mortality rates of the large enclosure animals were actually similar to those found in the wild during this same period (Crawford et al. 2010). In addition, captive-bred rabbits, kits born in the large enclosure, and wild-born rabbits were able to survive the winter. To further bolster survival rates of rabbits in the large enclosure, we greatly extended the netting over burrow complexes to further curb mortality due to aerial predators (which accounted for several mortalities in early November 2011). We hope that this spring will further show that the large enclosures can be successfully used to breed large numbers of kits for reintroduction.



Pygmy rabbit at burrow entrance under protective netting in large enclosure



Curious pygmy rabbit caught on a trail camera inside large enclosure

- Fully Released Kits on Sagebrush Flat WLA

Due to very limited snow conditions this winter, only approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ of the release area could be surveyed for tracks and burrow use in the snow. Since the release of 44 Columbia Basin lineage kits (born in captivity but removed within weeks of birth) in spring and early summer of 2011, four burrow systems initiated by last year's kits settled on Sagebrush Flat and adjacent DNR land have been discovered thus far. Genetic tests conducted at University of Idaho and burrow locations suggest that these burrows belong to 3-4 individuals. To better assess the long term success of these kits, additional surveys and fecal genetic tests will be conducted this spring and summer to more fully cover the release area in search of burrows, more settled rabbits, and possible breeding between released rabbits in spring 2012.



Pygmy rabbit burrow with pellets



Pygmy rabbit tracks in the melting snow



Pygmy rabbit burrow on Sagebrush Flat WLA

- Captive-Bred Rabbits at Oregon Zoo

Oregon Zoo is caring for 20 captive-bred pygmy rabbits through July 2012. These rabbits, along with the two wild males sent to them in March will be used to breed the largest number of kits possible for release in spring/summer of 2012. Kits will again be soft released 2-3 weeks post-emergence from the natal burrow, while others will be retained in the large enclosures for breeding next year.

- Upcoming Events

April-July 2012

Breeding season in the Oregon Zoo facility and on Sagebrush Flat WLA

April-July 2012

Additional burrow surveys performed on Sagebrush Flat WLA and surrounding lands

May-August 2012

Releases of kits and wild-born adults, monitoring

End of July 2012

Captive-bred adults are moved from Oregon Zoo to Sagebrush Flat large enclosures

- Special Thanks

The translocation of wild rabbits in March was a success largely because of the assistance and involvement of a number of people who contributed to these efforts. Staff from several agencies came together working on the trapping team, shuttling rabbits, providing logistical support out of state, and receiving rabbits at the release site. In particular, we would like to thank:

WDFW-	Gary Wiles, Harriet Allen, Elizabeth Rodrick, Jon Gallie, Chad Eidson, David Volsen, Ann Winters, Dan Peterson, Rich Finger, Angel Hastings
USFWS-	Chris Warren, Greg Burak, Michelle Eames, Geoff Langley, Tammy Ash, Erin Britton-Kuttel, Renee Chi
Oregon Zoo-	David Shepherdson, Michael Illig, Leanne Klinski
NDOW-	Rory Lamp, Pete Bradley, Brad Bauman, Larry Gilbertson, Ken Gray
UDWR-	John Shivik, Riley Peck, Keith Day, Kevin Bunnell
BYU-	Randy Larsen, Robert Edgel, Janet Lee and their student crew
BLM-	Janet Netcher and Ray Sandoval (NV); Chris Colton and Brandon Jolly (UT)
Private Veterinarians-	Mike Perchetti and Daniel Richardson (Elko, NV), Dustin Durfee (Richfield, UT), Chris Kolste (Tremonton, UT)