



News Release

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RECOVERY STRATEGY PLANNED FOR ENDANGERED SOUTHWESTERN BIRD

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has released a draft recovery plan for the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl that recommends strategies for conserving the endangered bird that was once common in southern to central Arizona. Comments on the plan will be accepted until April 9.

A 37-member team developed the draft. Seven scientists from academia, federal and state agencies, species experts and raptor biologists were the principals in prescribing recovery steps. An Implementation Group, comprising twenty-nine people, served as a sounding board and ensured suggested activities are realistic and executable. The larger group included representatives of local affected parties, tribal and state agencies, counties, municipalities and special interest groups (environmental, development, mining, ranching, and property rights).

“The Recovery Team has done an exceptional job of distilling what is known of the owl and identifying what still needs to be known,” said Dale Hall, Director of the Service’s Southwest Region. “At the same time, they have presented a practical approach to advancing its recovery.”

The Service added the Arizona population of the pygmy-owl to the federal list of endangered species in 1997. It recently released a proposal to designate 1.2 million acres of habitat as critical to the survival of the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl. The public comment periods for the proposed critical habitat designation and the recovery plan (two separate but related documents) overlap.

“After we incorporate comments, the recovery plan will be finalized and shared with other federal, state, tribal and local governmental agencies as best management practices for conserving the pygmy-owl,” said Hall. “The document will be our compass for the next planning stage – how to eventually recover the owl so it may be removed from the list of endangered species.”

The draft recovery plan identifies criteria for moving the owl from endangered to threatened status and will be effective for five years.

In the plan, all currently known pygmy-owls in Arizona and the habitat they occupy (since 1993 - when formalized surveys began) would be protected. It also calls for identifying and maintaining two

interconnected systems of habitat; one extending from areas occupied by pygmy-owls in Mexico to the northern edge of the historical range near Phoenix and the other from the Mexican border at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument into rural southwestern Maricopa and Pinal counties. These corridors bound the sovereign Tohono O'odham Nation – an area presumed to be important to the small owl's recovery.

The Recovery Team divided the owl's historic territory into eight Recovery Areas. The segments help focus recovery efforts; it is not intended that entire Recovery Areas be set aside in perpetuity. Each Recovery Area has specific land management and development recommendations.

Additionally, the draft plan provides recommendations for livestock grazing, fire management, and recreational activities. The plan also considers augmentation of pygmy-owl populations through the use of nest boxes, moving birds into suitable unoccupied habitat, adding new owls to genetically isolated populations, stimulating birds to produce additional eggs, and captive rearing.

Recovery tasks are prioritized and agencies that could contribute to those tasks are identified. The estimated cost to complete the tasks is expected to be \$5 million over the five year period.

Historically, the owl was reported as common in Arizona cottonwood-mesquite forests along southern and central Arizona rivers and washes. Loss of these forests and woodlands over the last 100 years, together with a lack of regulatory protection and the rapid development of dense Sonoran scrub land now utilized by remaining owls, lead to the endangerment of the population. Arizona surveys documented 41 adult pygmy-owls in 1999, 34 adults in 2000, 36 in 2001, and 18 in 2002.

The Service seeks public review and comments on the draft recovery plan through April 9. The draft recovery plan is available on the Internet at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov/>. Requests for the draft plan and comments should be submitted to Steve Spangle, Field Supervisor, Arizona Ecological Services Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona 85021, by mail, fax (602-242-2513) or email at cfpo_recovery@fws.gov.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

NOTE TO EDITORS: Pygmy-owl photos, maps of Recovery Areas and Special Management Areas, and the complete draft plan are available at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov/> or by calling the contacts list on page one.