

## NEWS RELEASE

**U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE  
Mountain-Prairie Region  
134 Union Boulevard  
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### **U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE WILL NOT CONDUCT IN-DEPTH REVIEW TO CONSIDER LISTING THE GUNNISON'S PRAIRIE DOG**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has reviewed a petition to list the Gunnison's prairie dog under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and has concluded the petition does not contain substantial scientific information that the petitioned action is warranted. The finding was published today in the *Federal Register*.

The Service made the determination in response to a petition received on February 23, 2004 from Forest Guardians and 73 other organizations and individuals. The petition requested that the Gunnison's prairie dog found in the "Four Corners" region of northern Arizona, southwestern Colorado, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah be listed as threatened or endangered. Under the ESA, the Service is required to review the petition to decide whether it contained substantial scientific information that warrants a more thorough (12 month) review.

"The Service remains interested in the population status, trends and ongoing management actions important to the conservation of the Gunnison's prairie dog," said Mitch King, the Service's Director of the Mountain-Prairie Region, "and we encourage interested parties to continue to gather data that will assist in these conservation efforts. More research is needed to better determine the distribution and abundance of the species throughout its range."

Populations of Gunnison's prairie dog colonies are variable, depending on environmental influences including habitat, the season, disease, and precipitation as well as human-related influences such as rangeland management practices, chemical control and recreational shooting.

Range-wide, approximately 73 percent of potential Gunnison's prairie dog habitat occurs on Tribal and private lands. In Arizona and New Mexico, a significant portion of potential habitat occurs on Tribal lands.

Based largely upon federal records from early poisoning efforts, it is apparent that Gunnison's prairie dog occupied habitat has declined range-wide from tens of millions of acres to approximately one million acres in 1961 to perhaps less than one million acres at present. The Service believes historic estimates are reasonable but also recognizes they are speculative. Without more information about the current status and population trends, the Service was not able to conclude that populations are declining.

Additional information is needed regarding the impacts of disease, specifically sylvatic plague, as well as more information regarding population status and trends. The Service has encouraged the States and Tribes to collect information on the current status of Gunnison's prairie dog. Results from these efforts should be available within a year; once received, the Service will reevaluate the status of the species.

All four states within the range of the Gunnison's prairie dog provide guidance in their Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies for conservation efforts between federal, tribal, state, local and private entities for the species. Additionally, the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies has completed a conservation assessment for the species that describes regulatory status, occupied habitat estimates, limiting factors, and conservation needs.

The Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) is a member of the Sciruidae family which includes squirrels, chipmunks, marmots, and prairie dogs. Adult Gunnison's prairie dogs vary in length from 12 to 15 inches and weigh 23 to 42 ounces, with males averaging slightly larger than females. They are a yellowish buff color with blackish hairs intermixed. The tops of their heads, sides of cheeks, and eyebrows are noticeably darker. The species differs from black-tailed prairie dogs in having a much shorter and lighter colored tail and from other white-tailed species in having grayish-white hairs in the tip of the tail rather than pure white. Gunnison's prairie dogs are found on grasslands and semi-desert and montane shrublands at elevations from 6,000 to 12,000 feet.

The ESA provides for citizens to petition the Service to take listing actions, including adding species to the lists of threatened and endangered wildlife and plants as well as removing species from the lists. The Service is required to make a 90-day finding on whether the petition presents substantial information that the petitioned action may be warranted.

This finding was prepared pursuant to a court order resulting from a lawsuit filed against the Service by Biodiversity Conservation Alliance.

A copy of the finding about Gunnison's prairie dog is available on the Internet at <http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/species/mammals/GunnisonPrairieDog/index.htm>

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 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 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 and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.