

## Questions and Answers

### Regarding a Petition to List the Gunnison's Prairie Dog as a Threatened or Endangered Species

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service concluded a petition to list the Gunnison's prairie dog as a threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act does not provide substantial information that a listing may be warranted at this time. When more information regarding the population status of the species becomes available, the Service will reevaluate this finding.

The following questions and answers provide information regarding this finding.

#### **What is the Service's finding regarding the petition to list the Gunnison's prairie dog?**

While Gunnison's prairie dog populations and habitat have declined from historic levels, the petition and its supporting documentation, as well as other available information, does not indicate that threats to the species rise to the level of Federal intervention by the Endangered Species Act at this time.

More research is needed to better determine the distribution and abundance of the species throughout its range as well as the magnitude of current threats.

#### **What information did the Service use to make this finding?**

In addition to reviewing the petition and its supporting documentation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service examined information contained in its files and information otherwise available from State and Federal agencies whose responsibilities include management of the Gunnison's prairie dog habitat.

#### **What factors can affect the Gunnison's prairie dog?**

Habitat loss and fragmentation, municipal development, recreational shooting, disease, and chemical control efforts can impact Gunnison's prairie dog populations.

At this time, we do not have substantial scientific information that these factors threaten the long-term persistence of the Gunnison's prairie dog. More information regarding the impacts of these factors with regard to persistence of prairie dog populations is needed.

#### **What do we currently know about these factors?**

##### **Habitat Loss:**

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 chemical control and recreational shooting.

The petitioners assert that habitat loss and fragmentation due to poor rangeland management and municipal development has impacted the Gunnison's prairie dog. Although municipal development may have adverse impacts on some Gunnison's prairie dog populations at a local scale, we do not have substantial information that it causes range-wide population declines. According to recent data, urbanization affects less than 2 percent of the potential habitat within the range of the species.

The Service is aware that a relationship exists between certain rangeland management, specifically overgrazing which causes the proliferation of cheatgrass which increases fire frequency and intensity. However, we have no information in our files that addresses the correlation between fire and Gunnison's prairie dog populations. The petition does not present substantial scientific information that fire is threatening the long-term persistence of the Gunnison's prairie dog. More information regarding the impacts of fragmentation and isolation with regard to persistence of prairie dog populations is needed.

**Disease:**

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.

**Recreational Shooting:**

We are aware that recreational shooting can reduce prairie dog population density at specific sites, and acknowledge the possibility of local extirpation may have occurred in isolated circumstances. However, no information is available in the petition or our files to support a correlation between a range-wide decline of Gunnison's prairie dogs and recreational shooting. Prairie dog colonies typically experience increased population growth rates following recreational shooting and can recover from very low numbers.

**Chemical Control:**

Information in our files supports the assertions made in the petition regarding dramatic historic declines in Gunnison's prairie dog occupied habitat due to early chemical control efforts directed at prairie dogs. However, fewer chemical control efforts for the species have been federally directed in recent years and we are not aware of any recent large-scale chemical control programs. The petition does not provide substantial scientific information that chemical control is a current threat to the species, nor do we have information in our files that supports such a conclusion.

**What is currently being done to conserve the Gunnison's prairie dog?**

All four states within the range of the Gunnison's prairie dog assert in their Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategies that the species is at risk, declining, and deserving of special management consideration. These Strategies were developed by the states in response to Congressional funding and provide guidance for conservation efforts between federal, tribal, state, local and private entities.

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 for the species. Conservation planning efforts are underway among state and federal agencies.

### **What is the Gunnison's prairie dog?**

The Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) is a member of the Sciruidae family which includes squirrels, chipmunks, marmots, and prairie dogs. Prairie dogs constitute the genus *Cynomys*. 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.

### **What is the current range of the Gunnison's prairie dog?**

The Gunnison's prairie dog is found in the "Four Corners" region of northern Arizona, southwestern Colorado, northwestern New Mexico, and southeastern Utah.

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.

### **What is a 90-day finding?**

Under the Endangered Species Act, any citizen or organization can petition the Service to list a species for Federal protection. The 90-day finding is the first step in processing a petition.

The finding is based on a detailed assessment of the petition and other available information on the species. Two possible conclusions can be reached as part of the 90-day finding: either substantial information was provided in the petition indicating that listing may be warranted – in which case, the species would then be placed on a list of candidate species and given further consideration for listing - or the information was not substantial enough to provide such an indication.