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Enviros sue U.S. over prairie dogs

By Clair Johnson

A coalition of conservation groups and individuals Monday sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to force the agency to address declining populations of the white-tailed prairie dog, a species they say has vanished from 92 percent of its historic range.

White-tailed prairie dogs inhabit a small area in south-central Montana, the sagebrush habitat of central and western Wyoming, northwestern Colorado and northeastern Utah. The groups said the white-tailed prairie dogs are critical to the health of the sagebrush ecosystem because they provide food for other species and crucial habitat for other native plants and animals.

The coalition, led by the Colorado-based Center for Native Ecosystems, filed a petition with the agency in July 2002 to list the white-tailed prairie dog as a threatened or endangered species under the Endangered Species Act.

The agency is required to make an initial determination about the status of the species within 90 days and make a final decision on formal protection within 12 months. The groups said FWS is more than three months late with its initial finding.

FWS said when the petition was filed that it didn't have the resources to review the petition within the time limits.

The groups said that because of the thoroughness of the listing petition, much of the necessary scientific research already is complete.

"The problem isn't a lack of knowledge," said Erin Robertson, staff biologist for Center for Native Ecosystems. "We know how to stop degrading and destroying prairie dog habitat. The problem is the government's obstructionism and stonewalling."

The groups said FWS routinely cites an inadequate budget and heavy workload as reasons for listing delays, but that this is a crisis of its own making. They said the Bush administration fought against increasing the ESA listing budget in fiscal year 2002 and refused to ask for more listing money in its supplemental request to Congress.

"Secretary of Interior Gale Norton and the Bush administration are trying to starve the endangered species listing program," said Jay Tutchton, an attorney with Earthjustice. "Unless this situation is reversed, many species may very well go extinct while waiting in line for review."

The coalition filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Missoula, where one of the lead groups, The Ecology Center, is located.

Diane Katzenberger, a public affairs spokesperson for FWS in Denver, said Monday that agency has not yet seen the lawsuit. FWS will reserve comments until it has a chance to read and evaluate it, she said.

Although small, Montana's white-tailed prairie dog population is representative of what the species faces through out its range, said Jacob Smith, of the Center for Native Ecosystems.

Montana has about 118 acres of white-tailed prairie dogs, which is down from an estimated 145-165 acres in 2001, in southern Carbon County.

Smith said the most important population, known as the Robertson Draw colony, is mostly located on the Custer National Forest. The colony inhabits land that the Forest Service offered for oil and gas leasing in January 2002. The groups protested that lease, and the dispute has not been resolved, Smith said.

Montana also has banned shooting of white-tailed prairie dogs on state and federal lands, Smith said.

The coalition said in its petition that white-tailed prairie dogs occupy about 800,000 acres, which is estimated to be 8 percent or less of its historic range.

Threats to the species include plague, an exotic disease fatal to prairie dogs; oil and gas drilling; recreational shooting; urban sprawl and land conversion, and a lack of legal protections, the group said.

Other coalition members include the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance; American Land Alliance in Washington, D.C.; Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, in Wyoming; Forest Guardians, in New Mexico; Sinapu, in Colorado, and naturalist and author Terry Tempest Williams of Utah.