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## Utah writer joins suit to force protection of prairie dog species

By Donna Kemp Spangler

Utah author Terry Tempest Williams is best known for her essays on desert, wilderness and solitude. Now add white-tailed prairie dogs to the list.

The white-tailed prairie dog once was found in Wyoming, Colorado, northeastern Utah and Montana.

On Monday, Williams joined a coalition of conservation groups to file suit in U.S. District Court in Montana to force the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the rapidly declining white-tailed prairie dog, which once roamed the West.

"If the prairie dog goes, so goes an entire ecosystem," Williams said. "Prairie dogs create diversity. Destroy them and you destroy a varied world."

In July 2002, the groups petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to list the white-tailed prairie dog as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Since it has failed to respond, the groups sued. The federal protection would require the federal government to develop a long-term recovery plan for the species and its habitat. Conservationists say research already exists that points to its decline and steps to take for its recovery.

"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 animals, which vary in size, provide food and crucial habitat to other native plants and animals, including badgers, burrowing owls and golden eagles.

Conservationists say all prairie dog species are disappearing rapidly across the West. The white-tailed prairie dog once was found in central and western Wyoming, northwestern Colorado, northeastern Utah and Montana's Carbon County. Utah has only a little more than 4,000 prairie dogs. The conservation groups three weeks ago requested that the species be reclassified as "endangered" from its current status as "threatened."

Conservationists blame the demise of the white-tailed prairie dogs on oil and gas drilling, suburban sprawl and conversion to agriculture use. More than 15,000 white-tailed prairie dogs were killed by recreational shooters on federal lands in Colorado last year, the groups say.

Sylvatic plague, wildfire and drought have caused the populations to dwindle, and conservationists blame federal land managers for not establishing meaningful protections.

The coalition, led by the Colorado-based Center for Native Ecosystems, also includes Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. Other members are American Lands Alliance of Washington, D.C.; Forest Guardians of Santa Fe, N.M.; Wyoming's Biodiversity Conservation Alliance; The Ecology Center of Missoula, Mont.; and Sinapu of Boulder, Colo.