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Groups rallying to protect the prairie dog

By Brent Israelsen

Rousted out of their homeland by real-estate and energy developers, sickened by the plague and used for target practice by bored "hunters," white-tailed prairie dogs have seen better days.

The critters might want to keep their eye on Halloween, though.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has agreed to decide by Oct. 31 whether the white-tailed prairie dog should be considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

A coalition of environmental groups won the concession last week in a lawsuit they filed in February 2003 to force the FWS to act on an earlier petition they filed calling for federal protection for the rodent.

Led by the Colorado-based Center for Native Ecosystems, the coalition, which includes the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, has been trying for about two years to persuade the FWS to act on the prairie dog, whose numbers declined dramatically during the past century.

FWS regional spokeswoman Diane Katzenberger said her agency simply has not had the time or financial resources to consider the prairie dog's plight.

"It's the usual stuff: workload factors and limited funding," Katzenberger said. "It doesn't mean we aren't concerned about the white-tailed prairie dog. It's not as if things aren't being done on behalf of the species."

But environmentalist groups argue the FWS and its sister agency, the Bureau of Land Management, are doing little to protect the animal.

The white-tailed prairie dog -- which is an important food source for many predators, including the endangered black-footed ferret -- is considered a "keystone" species, meaning its well-being determines the health of the larger ecosystem.

Once ranging throughout the Rocky Mountains, the animal today is found on just 800,000 acres in eastern Utah, northwestern Colorado and southern Wyoming.

Those three states have formed a task force to assess the prairie dog's situation. That assessment was originally due for release last summer but has been delayed until the end of May, said Craig McLaughlin, mammals coordinator for Utah's Division of Wildlife Resources.

The three-state task force also is developing strategies toward an Endangered Species Act action, which can lead to restrictions on human activity on public lands.

In the meantime, DWR this year will prohibit hunting of the prairie dog on all public lands between April 1 and June 15, when the critter is raising its young.