
News

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Scientists urged protection for W.Va. squirrel

By **Ken Ward Jr.**
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CHARLESTON, W.Va. - Against the advice of outside experts, the Bush administration today will formally remove the West Virginia northern flying squirrel from the endangered species list.

Interior Secretary Dick Kempthorne announced the move Monday, in a news release that credited conservation efforts and habitat restoration with rescuing the squirrel from the brink of extinction.

But two of three academic experts brought in by the Interior Department recommended against the delisting.

Those outside scientists backed wildlife advocates who said the agency had little data to support its claim that the squirrel has recovered. One group estimated the squirrel population at half of the nearly 1,200 projected by Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service.

"I hate to see it not have any protection at all," said Virginia Commonwealth University biologist John Pagels, one of the reviewers who opposed the government's proposal.

Pagels and Peter Weigl, a Wake Forest University biologist, had urged the government to at most "down-list" the squirrel from endangered to threatened.

A third academic reviewer supported the delisting proposal. The U.S. Forest Service backed the delisting, as did West Virginia's Divisions of Forestry and Natural Resources. Plum Creek Timber and the owners of Snowshoe Mountain Resort also submitted letters of support.

The delisting would remove the general prohibition against killing the squirrels or seriously damaging vital habitat. It would also relieve developers of various projects - from housing developments to wind farms or strip mines - from going through Endangered Species Act reviews or writing habitat conservation plans.

Government officials announced the final delisting action as the Bush administration was already under fire for a proposal that would allow federal agencies approving projects such as dams and highways to decide for themselves whether endangered species are likely to be harmed.

"The delisting of the West Virginia northern flying squirrel appears to be part of the Bush administration's plan to gut the Endangered Species Act by keeping rare species off the list, undercutting protections for some on the list, and removing others from the list altogether," said Judy Rodd, director of Friends of Blackwater, part of a 29-group Save Our Squirrel coalition.

Formally called the Virginia northern flying squirrel, but better known as the West Virginia northern flying squirrel, the subspecies is as old as the mastodons. It lives in clusters atop the highest Appalachian peaks of West Virginia and adjacent Highland County, Va. About 10,000 years ago, it became isolated from other northern flying squirrel species when ice sheets covering North America receded.

The so-called flying squirrels do not actually fly, but glide using a furry, sheetlike membrane along the sides of their bodies.

Between the 1880s and the 1940s, industrial logging destroyed much of the high-elevation, spruce and northern hardwood forests where the squirrel lived. Biologists believe that a few resilient populations survived in small, scattered patches of forests.

In July 1985, Interior Department officials placed the squirrel on the endangered species list, citing primarily declining habitat. Two years ago, the agency announced its belief that the squirrel was "ready to fly solo," and began a formal delisting effort.

On Monday, Kempthorne declared, "Based on data from more than 20 years of monitoring the squirrel's presence in the forest, as well as the completion of extensive habitat analysis, our scientists are confident that the squirrel has recovered to the point where it no longer requires federal protection."

An Interior Department news release noted that in 1985, "only 10 flying squirrels in four separate areas were located." Since that time, the release said, squirrel distribution has "grown dramatically." By the end of 2006, biologists had captured more than 1,200 squirrels at 109 sites throughout much of its historic range.

But Kieran Suckling, policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said that the government's numbers are bogus.

For one thing, the agency news release does not make clear that many of those 1,200 squirrels were probably "re-captures" of the same animal. Suckling analyzed the Interior data and estimated that there were really only 654 individual squirrels included.

In its Federal Register notice scheduled for publication today, the Interior Department conceded that the 1,200 figure was probably wrong, but said Suckling's analysis was also off. The real figure is probably about 908, about 20 percent fewer squirrels than cited in the agency news release, according to the Federal Register notice.

But Suckling also noted that government officials are still comparing the 10 squirrels from a one-time study in 1985 to the much larger number found over a 20-year period since then.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service has really cooked the books to make it appear that the squirrel is safe, when it really isn't," Suckling said.

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