
March 21, 2007

Tom Chapman

• Endangered no more? Flying squirrel closing in on removal from list

Working to recover endangered and threatened species is a lengthy task fraught with the knowledge that some species may never recover. But when a species does recover — with stable or increasing numbers, with adequate habitat, and with no serious threats to its continued existence — we all have cause to celebrate.

Recovery of the endangered West Virginia northern flying squirrel depended upon recovery of its spruce forest habitat. During the 22 years the Endangered Species Act has protected the flying squirrel, the habitat has regenerated and the squirrel occupies its historic range.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal in December to remove the flying squirrel from protection under the Endangered Species Act drew attention from West Virginians who have a special bond with the squirrel and the unique habitat where this animal lives. Service biologists share that appreciation for the flying squirrel along with a sense of pride in its recovery.

The service added the flying squirrel to the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife in 1985, establishing federal protection for the few remaining squirrels biologists found — just 10 of these very elusive squirrels in four separate areas. Twenty years later, conservation actions and natural regeneration of the squirrel's habitat had remarkably improved the status of the flying squirrel, and biologists captured about 1,100 squirrels at 107 locations.

The proposal to remove federal protection for the flying squirrel came from a long deliberative process starting in 1994 when state wildlife biologists from West Virginia and Virginia felt confident the status of the squirrel had improved to the point where its status should be changed to "threatened." During the next 13 years, biologists at the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service accumulated and analyzed information about this unique animal from an extensive monitoring program that continues today.

In 2001, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service amended the 1990 recovery plan for the flying squirrel, providing guidelines for habitat identification and management on federal lands such as the Monongahela National Forest. The guidelines recommended prohibiting logging on flying squirrel habitat. The forest recently adopted this amendment as part of its long-term management plan.

We began a formal review of the flying squirrel's status in 2003. The ESA requires reviews of protected species to determine if the status of endangered or threatened species has changed. Biologists in the Northeast Region are reviewing about 10 species each year in a concerted effort to fulfill the requirement.

After three years of careful study of the available scientific information on the flying squirrel, biologists in the service's West Virginia Field Office based in Elkins found that threats to the flying squirrel have either been eliminated or largely decreased. They concluded that the squirrel no longer faces the threat of extinction, and thus no longer meets the requirement for federal ESA protection.

To make an informed final decision on whether removal from the list is warranted, we initiated a public process to seek additional scientific information as well as peer review of our proposal. We published our proposal and request for public comments on Dec. 19, 2006, and, in response to interest in our proposal, we extended the comment period to April 23.

As part of this process, we have released to the public more than 8,500 pages of scientific documents supporting the proposed delisting of the flying squirrel. As is typical during deliberations, we withheld

the staff's draft documents (about 2,500 pages), the final form of which was in the released materials. Keeping these draft materials confidential is intended to encourage frank discussion among our staff.

The service's director must make a final decision on the proposal to remove Endangered Species Act protection for the flying squirrel by Dec. 19. One option is to continue protection for the squirrel as an "endangered" species. The other options are to propose either changing the squirrel's status from endangered to the less critical "threatened" or removing ESA protection altogether.

If we remove the flying squirrel from federal protection, we will continue to monitor the status of the squirrel for at least five years, as required by the Endangered Species Act, with assistance from the state of West Virginia, the Monongahela National Forest and other agencies. This monitoring will ensure that we have made the correct decision, that the West Virginia northern flying squirrel is truly recovered from the brink of extinction.

Additional information, including links to the recovery plan, the five-year review and the Federal Register notice of the proposal to remove the "endangered" status may be found at www.fws.gov/northeast/WVNorthernFlyingSquirrel. These documents also are available from the service's West Virginia Field Office. Call (304) 636-6586.

During a comment period, we are most interested in scientific information about the squirrel that may have escaped our review. We welcome your comments as we compile all the available scientific information about the species. Please ensure that we receive your communications by April 23. Send them by mail to: Assistant Chief, Endangered Species, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 300 Westgate Center Drive, Hadley, MA 01035-9587; or by fax to (413) 252-8482.

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