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Flying squirrel: Bush's prank still not funny

Environmental groups call on Obama to restore protection for endangered species

WASHINGTON – George Bush has been out of office for more than two months on this April Fool's Day – but the [West Virginia northern flying squirrel](#) certainly isn't laughing at the pranks the former president pulled. His administration removed the charismatic squirrel from the endangered species list last August, leaving the loveable rodent hanging in, well, mid air.

Fortunately for the poster critter of the state's mountaintop forests, a coalition of West Virginia and national environmental organizations today extended an olive branch – filing a formal notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over its decision to remove the squirrel's protection. This gives the Obama administration 60 days to right Bush's wrong and avoid needless litigation.

“The Bush administration may have gotten a kick out of destroying habitat and putting wildlife in danger, but we don't,” said Judy Rodd, director of [Friends of Blackwater](#), a West Virginia-based conservation group. “The decision to take the flying squirrel off the endangered species list was a political move to allow more destruction of the squirrel's forest habitat for energy extraction and development.”

The Bush administration didn't let itself get tripped up by facts, either, according to Noah Greenwald, biodiversity program director for the [Center for Biological Diversity](#) in Portland, Oregon. “Bush's decision to de-list the flying squirrel was based on shoddy science,” he said, adding that logging and global warming are severe threats to the nocturnal mammal's survival. “When you're a species that lives at the top of the mountain and the forest beneath you disappears because the climate is warming, you've got nowhere else to go. Even the flying squirrel can only soar so far.”

The tiny squirrel who appears to fly with a brown cape when in flight is dearly loved throughout its Appalachian Mountain homeland. Local protectors have even rallied around a mascot representative of the species they affectionately call “Ginny.” The effort has caught the attention of some powerful allies. [U.S. Rep. Nick Rahall](#) (D-WV), chairman of the House Committee on Natural Resources and long time supporter of the Endangered Species Act (ESA), conducted two hearings on the issue during the past few years. At a 2007 hearing on the ESA, Rahall said that the U.S. Interior Department “seems bent on abdicating its mandated responsibilities” under the law “to protect God's creatures for future generations.”

The groups contend that the Bush administration illegally removed the West Virginia northern flying squirrel from the Endangered Species List. They go on to allege that Fish and Wildlife ignored an official species recovery plan and the recommendations of independent scientists – pointing to a U.S. Government Accountability Office report that concluded the agency failed to follow the squirrel’s recovery plan. The groups also say that the squirrel still has a very small population, and that logging, oil and gas drilling, mining, road building, and climate change threaten its sensitive habitat.

“We’re hoping that a lawsuit won’t be necessary now that Bush is out of office,” Rodd said. “The 60-day notice we’ve given the Fish and Wildlife Service gives us a very good opportunity to work with the Obama administration to bring Ginny home.”

The organizations defending the flying squirrel are: Center for Biological Diversity, Friends of Blackwater, Heartwood, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, The Wilderness Society, and WildSouth. The organizations are represented by Meyer Glitzenstein & Crystal, a Washington, D.C. public interest law firm.

Photos Available: Photographs of the flying squirrel are available for press use. Contact Judy Rodd for them.

Additional Sources: Contact any of the following for additional insight: Noah Greenwald, Center for Biological Diversity, (503) 484-7495; Hugh Irwin, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, (828) 252-9223; Ben Prater, Wild South (828) 258-2667, and Leigh Haynie, Heartwood, (337) 886-9145.