

October 29, 2007

Gunnison's Prairie Dog Comments  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
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VIA ELECTRONIC & CERTIFIED MAIL

**Re: Gunnison's prairie dog**

Dear Mr. Thompson,

We request federal protection for the Gunnison's prairie dog (*Cynomys gunnisoni*) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This species clearly warrants listing, given that it has disappeared from 97% of its historic range across Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah and continues to face an onslaught of threats to its survival.

The Gunnison's prairie dog was initially denied federal protection due to political interference. Other species, including the white-tailed prairie dog, Gunnison sage-grouse, roundtail chub, Mexican garter snake and many others have suffered the same fate at the hands of Julie MacDonald, who has since resigned amidst scandal. All of these species deserve a second chance.

The Gunnison's prairie dog was initially headed toward ESA listing. As was determined by your own biologists, sylvatic plague is a significant threat to this species. Sylvatic plague is a non-native disease to which prairie dogs have virtually no immunity. It has already extirpated Gunnison's prairie dogs from extensive areas in several states. Yet, over the course of four days, from January 19-23, 2006, those biologists were reversed: Julie MacDonald ordered that a positive 90-day petition finding be replaced with a negative 90-day finding. The original positive finding stated,

We have determined that substantial information is presented in the petition and available in our files to indicate that sylvatic plague may threaten the Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing may be warranted. USFWS email dated January 19, 2006 at p. 31.

This was replaced by a rewritten plague finding,

We have determined that information in the petition and readily available in our files do not constitute substantial scientific information that disease or predation are threats to Gunnison's prairie dog such that listing under the Act may be warranted. We recognize that sylvatic plague has been and continues to be a major mortality [sic] factor for Gunnison's prairie dog, but the impact that this disease has had on the overall status of the species

remains unclear. More information on the impacts of disease, specifically sylvatic plague, with regard to persistence of Gunnison's prairie dog populations is needed. USFWS email dated January 23, 2006 at p. 28.

No intervening scientific discoveries in the course of these four days justified this reversal. Rather, the Gunnison's prairie dog was denied federal protection for political reasons, in direct violation of the requirements of the ESA that listing determinations be based solely on biological information.

The Service is now required to issue a 12-month petition finding for this species. This time, the finding should recognize that, on the basis of plague alone, the Gunnison's prairie dog should be listed. In addition, habitat destruction, poisoning, shooting, climate change and other threats further underscore the need for federal protection. Large swaths of Gunnison's prairie dog habitat continue to be destroyed by oil and gas drilling in the San Juan Basin or eliminated by urban sprawl in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and elsewhere. There are no limits on the numbers of Gunnison's prairie dogs that can be poisoned or gassed. While there are seasonal closures on Gunnison's prairie dog shooting in three states, New Mexico – which contains nearly half of the Gunnison's range – has no limits on shooting at all. Despite a seasonal closure in Arizona, the number of prairie dogs killed is rising. Climate change impacts are a double-edged sword: prolonged drought can deplete prairie dog forage, and extremely wet weather may cause increases in plague.

According to figures in the Service's February 2006 negative 90-day petition finding, the Gunnison's prairie dogs now occur on only 3% of their former range, having dwindled from 24 million acres in 1916 to approximately 722,000 acres at present. 71 Fed. Reg. 6241, 6244. All site-specific population trend information presented in that finding – with the exception of Aubrey Valley, Arizona – indicated declines in Gunnison's prairie dog populations. *Id.*

There is no time to waste. Having been unjustly denied federal protection nearly two years ago, the Gunnison's prairie dog should be expeditiously listed.

Sincerely,



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