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Fish and Wildlife Service declines to list Gunnison's prairie dog

Town: Decision won't affect management of Valley Floor colony

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A Valley Floor prairie dog peeks out of its burrow. [File photo]

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has declined to list the Gunnison's prairie dog, a hyper-social, ground-dwelling rodent that lives in underground burrows in the Four Corners region, as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The agency announced its decision last week. It comes on the heels of the completion of a 12-month review in response to a petition to list the rodent that was brought forward by environmental groups concerned about threats such as urbanization, oil and gas operations,

agriculture and invasive species.

According to FWS, protecting the Gunnison's prairie dog under the Endangered Species Act is not warranted at this time.

"Gunnison's prairie dog populations are stable and not declining, due largely to conservation efforts by state Game and Fish agencies that recognize the crucial role that prairie dogs play in the health of North American prairies," the FWS stated in a press release.

Telluride's Valley Floor is home to a population of Gunnison's prairie dog that ignited controversy in the community a few years ago when the colony grew very rapidly in a short number of years. The FWS decision will not affect town's management of the Valley Floor prairie dogs, according to town officials.

"We're managing it as a keystone species," said Lance McDonald, program director for the town. "The Valley Floor management plan has a conservation area for the species, and then a natural dispersal policy on the rest of the property." (Natural dispersal means that the town allows the prairie dogs to

expand beyond their original colony, not taking any steps to keep them contained but also not taking measures to protect them outside of the colony.)

That very management approach makes Telluride's population of Gunnison's prairie dog an exception, said Taylor Jones, an endangered species advocate with WildEarth Guardians, which proposed the listing along with other environmental groups. Most colonies do not have the advantage of protections, she said.

"The Gunnison's prairie dog has declined by 95 percent throughout its historic range," Jones said. "The prairie dogs that you are seeing around there are actually pretty small remnants of what was around in the early 1900s."

The species, she said, "is still under siege by a lot of threats," including development, shooting, poisoning and plague, which can be particularly devastating to a colony.

"We believe those factors are still threats. Clearly the Fish and Wildlife Service does not agree with us," Jones said.

Prairie dogs are controversial animals, Jones said, but their importance in an ecosystem cannot be understated.

"People either love them or hate them, but they are also a keystone species," she said. "When you have prairie dogs, you have this huge diversity of other species."

Jones said WildEarth Guardians is looking into the possibility of challenging the finding.

"We believe that it's not the best decision and that it's contrary to the Endangered Species Act," she said.

WildEarth Guardians (formerly Forest Guardians) first submitted a petition for the species to get listed in 2004. In 2006, the FWS released a finding that the petition did not present substantial scientific information indicating the listing was warranted. WildEarth, joined by several other organizations, has been fighting for a listing ever since.

Telluride resident Ramona Gaylord, who advocated for protections of the Valley Floor prairie dogs in the past, said she was disappointed in the decision.

"Giving it the added protection that the Endangered Species Act provides, this would have helped guarantee the long-term survival of this native keystone species," Gaylord said in an email.

Gaylord said there are many reasons that Gunnison's prairie dogs play an integral role in grassland ecosystems, such as their ability to aerate the soil and enhance biodiversity through digging. Today, they face myriad threats.

"As our human populations continue to raise and the human-wildlife interfaces increase, the [Gunnison's prairie dogs] will have an uphill battle," Gaylord wrote. "I am hopeful, but not optimistic,

that the grandchildren of this generation may have the opportunity to observe a colony of [Gunnison's prairie dogs] and to enjoy the other species that are associated with their colonies."

Telluride originally opted to take a containment strategy with the Gunnison's prairie dog colony on the Valley Floor when it inked the management plan in 2009. But in the years following, the colony expanded drastically, sparking complaints that the critters were going to take over the entire 570 acres of open space.

After efforts by the town to trap and relocate the prairie dogs back to the colony failed, the idea of lethal containment was raised, but proved highly unpopular. Following several public meetings and partnership with the San Miguel Conservation Foundation and WildEarth Guardians, the town officially devised the natural dispersal policy, adopting it in June of 2011.

Although the town does not have firm scientific numbers, McDonald said, it appears the prairie dog population has decreased in recent years with the rise of predators, which was the outcome many had hoped for.

"We think it's primarily associated with predation by badgers and to some extent coyotes," he said.

"This is still so early in the greater process, but certainly the natural predators are starting to return to the property."