

## WildEarth Guardians sues FWS over Gunnison's prairie dog

Species lives on Telluride's Valley Floor

By Heather Sackett Associate Editor  
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A Western environmental organization sued the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service last week for its refusal to list the Gunnison's prairie dog as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

WildEarth Guardians filed the suit in federal district court in Phoenix, Ariz. on April 17, saying the FWS failed to use the best available science to properly consider the act's five listing factors or consider the

historic range of the species. Ongoing urban oil and gas development, shooting, poisoning, outbreaks of sylvatic plague, drought and climate change pose significant threats to the Gunnison's prairie dog and its habitat, according to WildEarth Guardians.

"We would like to see them protected," said Bethany Cotton, wildlife program director for WildEarth Guardians. "We would like the service to take a look again. We thought the analysis was just deficient."

In November, the FWS declined to list the hyper-social, ground-dwelling rodent that lives in underground burrows in the Four Corners region, saying protecting the animal was not warranted at this time. Telluride's Valley Floor is home to a population of Gunnison's prairie dog that



A Gunnison's prairie dog. [Planet file photo]

ignited controversy a few years ago when the colony grew very rapidly in a short number of years. The town has a “natural dispersal” policy regarding the species, which means it lets the animals expand beyond their original colony, but doesn’t take measures to protect them outside the colony.

WildEarth Guardians (formerly Forest Guardians) first submitted a petition with more than 100 signatures 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. WildEarth Guardians is a conservation organization with offices in Denver, Salt Lake City, Utah, Tucson, Ariz., Santa Fe, NM and Missoula, Mont., which aims to protect wildlife, wild places and rivers.

In 2008, the FWS found the Gunnison’s prairie dog warranted for listing in the montane (high elevation) portion of their range and placed it on the list of candidate species. In 2010, a court remanded that decision because it said the FWS had improperly listed only a portion of the species.

“We were surprised,” Cotton said. “We expected them to get protection in the montane portion. We were a little surprised all protections were removed.”

Cotton said prairie dogs are important to the ecosystem, helping to aerate the soil, trim native grasses and are prey for coyotes, badgers, ferrets and hawks. The species has seen a 95 percent decline since the early 1900s, according to WildEarth Guardians.

“It’s hard to say the species is not threatened with extinction given the reduction in habitat and in actual numbers,” Cotton said. “A whole lot of other species are dependent on prairie dogs. If you have prairie dogs, you have a lot more other wildlife. They are just very important to the ecosystem.”

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Public Affairs Officer Steve Segin said the agency could not comment on pending litigation.