

## FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

### **Issuance of Endangered Species Act Section 10(a)(1)(A) Enhancement of Survival Permits and Implementation of a Template Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) of the proposed implementation of a Template Safe Harbor Agreement (Template SHA) for the Columbia Basin distinct population segment of the pygmy rabbit (*Brachylagus idahoensis*) (CBPR). In association with the Template SHA, the Service proposes to issue Enhancement of Survival Permits (Permits), pursuant to section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act (Act), to non-Federal land owners and managers (Participants) who elect to enroll their properties under the Template SHA. The EA describes the probable effects of this action on the human environment under two alternatives: the preferred alternative and the no-action alternative.

#### **Decision**

Following a comprehensive review and analysis of the Template SHA and EA, the Service has selected the preferred alternative because it best facilitates collaboration between the Service, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, and prospective Participants while providing the following conservation benefits to the CBPR:

- Suitable habitats will be maintained on enrolled properties and be available for use by CBPRs released onto recovery emphasis areas.
- Habitats on enrolled properties will facilitate the dispersal of newly released CBPRs and enhance the connectivity of recovery emphasis areas.
- New subpopulations of the CBPR may become established on enrolled properties through natural population expansion.
- Additional wild CBPRs may be located on properties being considered for enrollment and be captured for captive breeding and/or translocation efforts, which will improve the overall recovery outlook for the species.
- Monitoring and future collection of biological information concerning the CBPR (e.g., information on CBPR dispersal, survival, and productivity) will be improved through cooperative management efforts on enrolled properties.
- Research and adaptive management for the CBPR can be made more comprehensive if implemented at a broader scale through facilitated access to enrolled properties.
- Successful implementation of cooperative, voluntary conservation measures will increase public awareness and support for CBPR recovery efforts.

Implementation of the preferred alternative, while exempting some incidental take of the CBPR, will provide long-term benefits to the CBPR and is not expected to have any significant adverse effects to wetlands, floodplains, or to the human environment.

Under the no-action alternative, recovery efforts for the CBPR would continue, however, no Permits would be issued in association with the Template SHA. As a result, little, if any, cooperation between the Service and landowners adjacent to recovery areas would occur, and

these lands would likely be managed to exclude CBPRs; none of the beneficial effects described above under the preferred alternative are expected to occur under the no-action alternative. The no-action alternative would result in the Service's inability to efficiently authorize incidental take of Columbia Basin pygmy rabbits or to provide regulatory assurances to eligible land owners or managers in exchange for their management contributions consistent with section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Act. The Service anticipates that many of the current threats to CBPR would continue under the no-action alternative, resulting in: potential declines in the quantity, quality, and availability of suitable shrub-steppe habitat for use by the CBPR; diminished connectivity of recovery emphasis areas; denial of Service access to eligible properties; lost opportunities to secure additional animals for future captive breeding or translocation efforts; and a reduced capacity to implement comprehensive adaptive management measures. The no-action alternative is not expected to have any significant adverse effects to wetlands, floodplains, or to the human environment.

### **Public Involvement and Review**

The public was extensively involved in developing the Template SHA and the EA. This involvement included four public meetings and numerous open meetings with stakeholder groups, including local, state, and federal governmental agencies, prospective Participants, agricultural and environmental groups, and other interested parties. Drafts of the Template SHA and EA were made available for public review during a 30-day public comment period beginning on September 7, 2006. The Service received three comment letters during the public review period, responses to which are addressed in the Service's Safe Harbor Agreement Findings and Recommendations document.

### **Conclusions**

Based on review and evaluation of the information contained in the supporting references, I have determined that the preferred alternative is not a major Federal action that would significantly affect the quality of the human environment, within the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, the Service is not required to prepare an environmental impact statement for this action. Furthermore, I have found that implementing the preferred alternative will have no significant impact on any of the environmental resources identified in the EA.

This Finding of No Significant Impact and supporting references are on file and are available for public inspection, by appointment, at the following U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offices:

Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office  
11103 East Montgomery Drive  
Spokane, Washington 98206  
Contact: Chris Warren

Pacific Regional Office  
911 NE 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Portland, Oregon 97232  
Contact: Rick Amidon

Interested and affected parties are being notified of our decision.

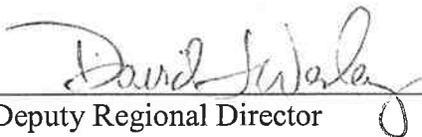
**Documents Incorporated by Reference**

Template Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit.

Final Environmental Assessment for Issuance of Endangered Species Act Section 10(a)(1)(A) Enhancement of Survival Permits in Association with a Template Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit.

Biological Opinion Regarding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Proposed Issuance of Section 10(a)(1)(A) Enhancement of Survival Permits Under a Template Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit (Reference Number: 1-9-07-F-0035).

Findings and Recommendations Regarding Issuance of Enhancement of Survival Permits in Accordance with the Template Safe Harbor Agreement for the Columbia Basin Pygmy Rabbit.

  
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Deputy Regional Director

3/09/07  
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Date