

Reclassification Western Gray Squirrels in Washington DECISION



Taylor Cotten, Conservation and Assessment Section Manager
Wildlife Diversity Division



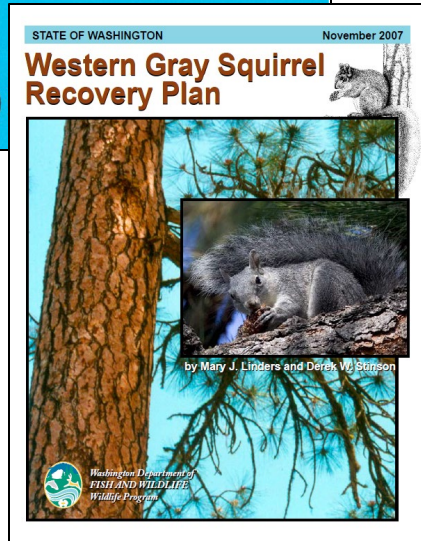
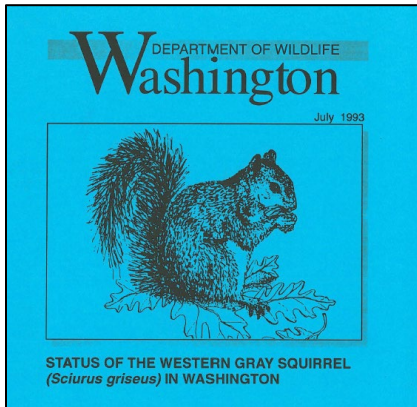
Washington
Department of
**FISH and
WILDLIFE**

Process & Timeline

- February 2023: 90-day public comment period on Draft
- June 2023: commission briefing and public comment on draft (extra step)
- August 2023: PSR finalized, published on website
- October 2023: Briefing and public comment on rule-making to reclassify
- Currently Western Gray Squirrel is a Threatened species "... likely to become an endangered species within the foreseeable future throughout a significant portion of its range within the state without cooperative management or removal of threats"
- Recommending reclassify as Endangered wildlife "seriously threatened with extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range within the state"



Listing of Western Gray Squirrel



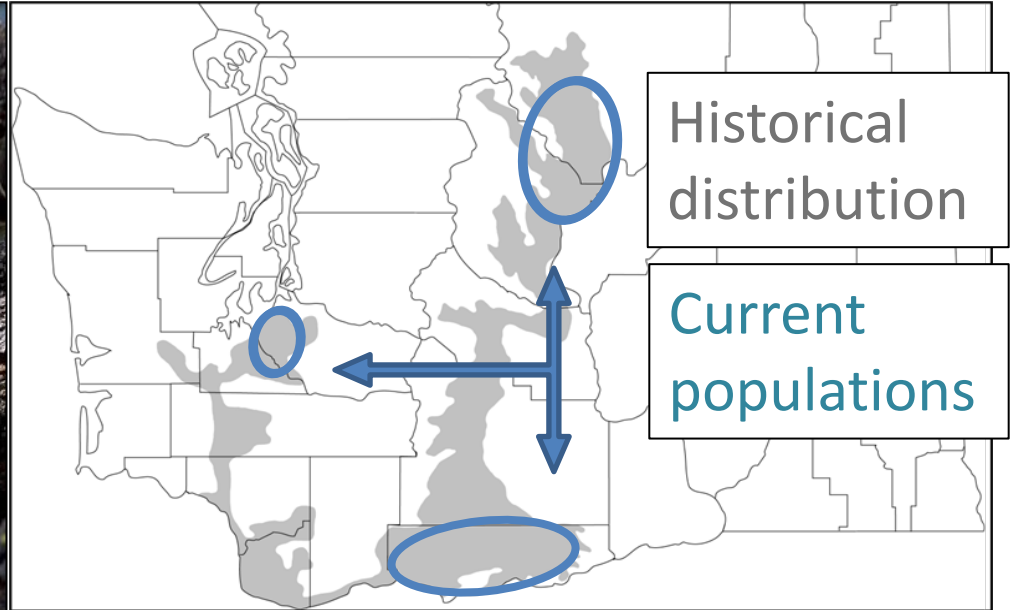
State

- **Threatened** since 1993
- Recovery plan 2007

Federal

- Proposed distinct population 2001
- Not warranted 2004





In Washington:

- Once uncommon to locally common across range
- Declining by the late 1800s and rare by 1970
- Now 3 isolated populations



Conclusions

- Squirrel occupancy appears low and fragmented.
- Primary habitat for Western Gray Squirrels in the Cascades has declined >20% since listing.
- Frequency and severity of wildfires are increasing with climate change.
- Current harvest rotation lengths in the South Cascades (35-45 years) likely limit availability of suitable stand structures.
- Conservation efforts to date have been insufficient to reverse downward trend.



Summary

- Western Gray Squirrel populations in WA disjunct and fragmented.
- Habitat loss and fragmentation, key factors in 1993 listing decision, are increasing.



Recommendation:

It is recommended the species be uplisted to Endangered:

“...seriously threatened with extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range within the state (WAC 220-610-110 [2.4])”



What is the effect of a change in classification?



- Brighter spotlight on the conservation of the species
- Priority Habitat and Species List – No change
All sensitive, threatened, endangered, and candidates are PHS species and reflected in recommendations for GMA and CAO
- Slight change in penalties for take of individuals
Threatened: Misdemeanor violation, minimum \$2,000 fine
Endangered: 1st conviction gross misdemeanor, 2nd conviction in 5 years class C felony
- Forest Practice Board update
 - Share critical habitat information with Forest Practices Board within 30 days of a classification change
 - The Forest Practices Board shall consider impacts of forest practices on essential habitat
 - Department of Natural Resources process, in consultation with WDFW.



Rule making and SEPA comments



Over 900 total comments

- Large majority were two form letters supporting the rule-change
 - Identifying declining habitat and threats described in the PSR
- Describe concerns that the voluntary habitat management guidelines are not adequate to recover squirrels
- Support of oak woodland habitat
- Also supported by the WDAC



Rule making and SEPA comments



- Comments not supporting the recommendation describe
 - Local abundance of squirrels,
 - Concern for future voluntary land management participation
 - And monitoring and success of those voluntary actions
 - Encouraging additional voluntary measures
 - Pausing a reclassification to do additional analyses or data collection.



Rule making and SEPA comments



- Also continues to be confusion on squirrel identification and awareness of western gray squirrels in WA
- Working with the communications team now on ways to improve that.
- Challenging to infer what is being commented on





Draft Motion Language

Motion: I move to adopt the recommended rule change as presented by staff.

