

Prairie dogs denied endangered protection

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Federal officials have announced they will not consider providing Gunnison prairie dogs with protection under the Endangered Species Act.

A Santa Fe, N.M.-based organization, Forest Guardians -- along with 73 other groups and individuals -- requested the protection in 2004, noting the prairie dog population has declined more than 90 percent during the past century and is threatened by plague, poisoning, development and oil, and gas operations, the Albuquerque Journal reported Thursday.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials said it was obvious the prairie dogs' occupied habitat has declined from tens of millions of acres to approximately less than 1 million acres. But federal officials said they could not conclude populations are declining without more information. Although admitting there's evidence of local population declines, the government officials said it is unclear how the animal is faring across its range that covers New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona.

"The finding is baseless," Nicole Rosmarino, conservation director for Forest Guardians, told the Journal. "It's more junk science from the Bush administration."

The groups plan to challenge the agency's decision.

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