

NEWS RELEASE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposes Protections for Whitebark Pine, a Keystone Species of the American West

*Public invited to comment on proposed threatened status under the Endangered
Species Act*



Left: Whitebark pine (*Pinus albicaulis*) tree in Glacier National Park. *Credit: Shawn McKinney / RMRS*
Right: Whitebark pine cones in Sawtooth National Forest. *Credit: Sean Sweeney / USFWS*

DENVER – New proposed conservation protections for the whitebark pine, an emblem of the American West, would aim to bolster new and ongoing conservation actions for the species’ pine recovery so these unique trees, and the many plants and animals they support, continue to endure for future generations.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service)'s proposal to list the species as threatened under the Endangered Species Act is based on the results of a rigorous Species Status Assessment involving review of the best available science. The Service today opened a 60-day public comment period to help inform future conservation of this species.

White pine blister rust, a non-native fungal disease, is harming native whitebark pine trees across the American West. Mountain pine beetles, altered wildfire patterns, and climate change are all negatively affecting the species' health. These factors led scientists to conclude that after decades of decline, an estimated 51% of all standing whitebark pine trees were dead as of 2016.

The Service determined it is not prudent to designate critical habitat for whitebark pine because habitat loss is not a threat to this species' continued survival. Whitebark pine is broadly distributed across a range of more than 80.5 million acres in seven western states (Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada) and Canada.

As a threatened species, protections for whitebark pine would include prohibiting the removal of whitebark pine on federal lands and prohibiting whitebark pine import, export and activities related to interstate and foreign commerce. Federal forest management, restoration or research-related activities would not be prohibited, allowing for optimal, flexible and adaptive forest activities that could advance whitebark pine conservation now and in the future.

Whitebark pine generally lives in cold, windy, high-elevation or high-latitude sites in western North America and also occurs in scattered areas of the warm and dry Great Basin (portions of California, Nevada and Oregon). The five-needled whitebark pine is considered a keystone species; its population health is closely tied to, and greatly influences, the population health of other native plants and animals. Healthy whitebark pine plays an important role in slowing runoff from snowmelt, reducing soil erosion, and providing high-energy seeds to birds and mammals. Whitebark pine provides food for grizzly bear and Clark's nutcracker, among many other wildlife species.

Grizzly bears in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem enjoy whitebark pine cone seeds where they overlap with their home range, and some conservationists have questioned whether an abundant supply of whitebark pine was necessary for the survival of bears in this ecosystem. Research indicates that as opportunistic feeders, Yellowstone grizzly bears can maintain healthy population levels even with varying availability of whitebark pine.

This listing determination is part of the Service's National Listing Workplan. In 2017, we invited members of the public to submit scientific information and data to inform our species status review. Whitebark pine has been a candidate for listing since 2011. In 2008, the Service was petitioned to list whitebark pine by the Natural Resources Defense Council.

A notice in the *Federal Register* will be published by the Service announcing the 60-day public comment period on December 2, 2020. The Service will consider comments from all interested parties received by February 1, 2021. Comments may be submitted electronically at www.regulations.gov by searching under docket number FWS-R6-ES-2019-0054 and clicking on the "comment now" button. The *Federal Register* notice provides information on how to comment by other means.

To learn more about the Species Status Assessment framework, visit:
https://www.fws.gov/endangered/improving_ESA/ssa.html

To learn more about whitebark pine, visit: <https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/whitebarkPine.php>

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