

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

Agenda Item: Swift Fox Conservation Strategy

Division: Wildlife **Action Needed:** Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Min

Background: Swift fox are a small cat-sized fox that live on shortgrass prairies from Texas to Alberta. By the late 20th century, they had disappeared from much of their historical range due largely to federal eradication campaigns focused on coyotes and wolves. They were petitioned to be federally listed in 1992. At that time, the state wildlife agencies in swift fox range states, including Montana, formed the Swift Fox Conservation Team (SFCT), which initiated basic research on distribution and habitat use and found the fox in several areas. Reintroductions were initiated in several other areas, often in collaboration with Tribes. Swift fox numbers increased in Montana because of reintroductions just north of the border in Alberta and on Fort Peck and Blackfeet Tribal lands. Listing was deemed unnecessary, but the SFCT continues to coordinate and implement conservation efforts for the species.

Montana's Swift Fox Conservation Strategy is tiered off the SFCT's goals and objectives. Opportunities to continue improving swift fox numbers and distribution appear to exist, especially in the northern portion of their historical range where gaps appear to occur in Montana. This document is intended to promote swift fox conservation and management by formulating a statewide strategy that facilitates coordinated and effective efforts by all interested organizations. The following priorities will help guide conservation of swift fox in Montana and contribute to the eight objectives of the SFCT. This strategy is intended to compliment the SFCT strategy while clearly prioritizing those objectives that Montana can affect. Our priorities include: 1) identify and map swift fox habitat in Montana, 2) conserve swift fox habitat and movement corridors, 3) monitor swift fox distribution and status, and 4) increase distribution of swift fox into suitable, connected habitats. A copy of the latest and, with commission adoption, final strategy is included in the commission packet.

The Strategy presented here for commission adoption differs from that presented in June 2018 in that it updates swift fox numbers based on finalized data and includes a section on harvest management. FWP will use a Population Viability Analysis (PVA) to inform harvest recommendations. PVA uses survival, reproduction and other important population metrics from field research to predict population persistence over time under different harvest regimes. Swift fox are very productive animals. Using the lower confidence interval from the 2014-15 population estimate, i.e. a low estimate, of 266 foxes and a harvest of 10, the probability of extinction within 100 years, barring unusual disease, weather, or other events, is zero. In the case of unusual events, FWP will respond as we did in 2017 by lowering harvest quotas from 30 to 10 when a 2015-16 estimate indicated reduced abundance, potentially from the severe winter in 2010-11. The overall population size for the Montana and Canada combined survey areas is approximately 900. There are other but unknown numbers of swift fox in Montana outside the survey areas.

Public Involvement Process & Results: The public comment period ran from June 14 to July 15, 2018, and we received 10 comments. Two commenters were supportive of the strategy, one of which asked for an increased emphasis on reintroductions. The other eight comments opposed the current harvest quota of 10. Based on comments and further staff review, it was decided to include the aforementioned section on harvest management in the Strategy. All comments are in the commission packet.

Alternatives and Analysis: The alternative to implementing this conservation strategy is to have no contemporary strategy. This would result in less clear priorities and more difficult communications and outreach on swift fox conservation.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission adopt this strategy to help guide swift fox conservation in Montana.

Proposed Motion:

I move the commission adopt the Montana Swift Fox Conservation Strategy as presented by FWP.