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4. ENDANGERED SPECIES: Snowy plover recovery plan relies on volunteer efforts (09/27/2007)

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service this week issued a long-delayed recovery plan for Pacific Coast populations of the Western snowy plover. The goal of the \$150 million plan is to increase and maintain a population of at least 3,000 breeding adults for 10 years in six recovery units stretching from Washington state to San Diego. During the last five years of the 40-year plan, FWS also hopes to see one fledged chick per adult male.

If all goes as planned, the small shore bird could be removed from "threatened" status under the Endangered Species Act by the year 2047. However, FWS cautioned that the recovery plan would rely on voluntary efforts by working groups and nonprofit organizations in the six recovery areas. "These groups can provide large networks of volunteers who can be mobilized to assist public resource agencies," the FWS plan stated.

Plover survival has always been complicated by the fact that they frequently nest in heavily used beach areas; the birds lay eggs in slight depressions of the sandy beaches. FWS said that the nests are vulnerable to disruption during the monthlong incubation period and young chicks are also at risk until they can fly.

This situation has led to beach closures and limits on activities, such as off-leash dog running, off-road vehicles or horseback riding in such nesting areas as Ocean Beach and Crissy Field in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area ([Land Letter](#), Nov. 16, 2006).

The recovery plan sets out targets for stable populations of breeding adults in the six areas: Washington/Oregon, 250; Del Norte/Mendocino counties in California, 150; San Francisco Bay, 500; Sonoma/Monterey counties, 400; San Luis Obispo/Santa Barbara counties, 1,200; and Los Angeles/San Diego counties, 500.

Currently, FWS estimates there are about 2,000 plovers that nest along beaches – they are considered a different population than plovers that are found inland. Although the recovery plan was first proposed in 2001, implementation was delayed during a comprehensive review of the birds' ESA status after petitions to delist it were filed by the coastal communities of Lompoc and Morro Bay, both in California.

In 2006, FWS concluded that delisting was not warranted. Previously, though, it had reduced the total area of critical habitat for the birds by about 40 percent to 12,145 acres along the Pacific coastline. FWS said the reduction resulted from "greater precision in mapping the habitat needed by the species," but economics also played a role.

Most of the reductions came in California, where FWS officials determined that the economic costs of lost beach recreation outweighed the benefits to the species.

An economic analysis prepared in 2005 by Industrial Economics Inc. estimated the cost of designating critical habitat for the plover would range from \$273 million to \$645 million through 2025.

The new plan is getting mixed reviews from environmental organizations. The Audubon Society, which has snowy plovers on its "watch list" of species of most concern, is pleased with the plan.

But the Center for Biological Diversity believes the population targets are too low. "This is an extinction plan, not a recovery plan," said CBD policy director Kieran Suckling. The goal of the plan would increase the population by 70 percent compared to what it was when the bird was listed in 1993, he said. Usually recovery plans call for a five- to 10-fold increase, he added.



A long delayed restoration plan for the Western snowy plover sets a modest goal of 3,000 breeding adults along the Pacific coastline by 2047. Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife.