



## National Wildlife Area Missing from Proposed Endangered Owl Habitat Designation

**Calgary, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010.** A proposal by the federal government that would limit habitat protection for the endangered Burrowing Owl has raised alarm among conservation groups. In a letter sent to Environment Minister Jim Prentice today, members of the Suffield Coalition voiced concern that his department's apparently selective identification of critical habitat overlooks burrowing owls in the Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Suffield National Wildlife Area.

The omission of critical habitat within Suffield in the proposed recovery strategy, even as the government department considers a proposal to drill for gas in the National Wildlife Area, has caused even greater concern.

"It is baffling that Burrowing Owl critical habitat has not been identified in Suffield NWA. National wildlife areas are supposed to be havens for species at risk. Yet in this NWA, the government has overlooked critical habitat for the endangered Burrowing Owl, while its decision is still pending about a 1275 gas well development." said Alberta Wilderness Association's Cliff Wallis. "We hope to see the final Recovery Strategy identify all critical habitat, including at Suffield."

The coalition is urging the government to revise its proposal to include Burrowing Owl critical habitat in Suffield National Wildlife Area, arguing that this is necessary to meet both the needs of the species and the requirements of the federal Species at Risk Act. Environment Canada's own testimony before a joint environmental assessment review panel in February 2008 would seem to support such a revision. The department told the panel (established to consider EnCana's -now Cenovus- proposal to drill 1,275 gas wells in the National Wildlife Area) that the endangered owls are known to nest in the area's rare natural prairie environment.

Burrowing owls are iconic small, long-legged grassland owls that were common summer residents in the southern regions of the Prairie Provinces and BC until the mid-1900s when modern agriculture practices began. By 1979, burrowing owls were extirpated from BC. In the Prairie Provinces they continue to decline, with fewer than 800 pairs remaining in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

The Species at Risk Act requires the federal government to have produced a Recovery Strategy for the Burrowing Owl by June 2006, and that it identify the species' critical habitat to the extent possible based on the best available information. This is the second proposed Recovery Strategy since 2007. "These delays mean that land use decisions are being made without identified critical habitat, despite there being sufficient information available" says Carla Sbert of Nature Canada, "That's not a recipe for recovery but for extirpation."

Nearly nineteen months since the Joint Review Panel made its recommendations on the Cenovus project, the government's decision is still pending. The Suffield Coalition continues to call on the government to reject EnCana's proposed gas drilling project in order to ensure the conservation of wildlife in the Suffield National Wildlife Area, and hopes to see this area adequately protected to support the recovery of burrowing owls and the many other endangered species in it.

**For more information:**

Cliff Wallis, Alberta Wilderness Association: 403-607-1970 cell

Carla Sbert, Nature Canada: 1-800-267-4088 ext. 222, [csbert@naturecanada.ca](mailto:csbert@naturecanada.ca)

*The Suffield Coalition comprises seven groups: Alberta Wilderness Association, Federation of Alberta Naturalists, World Wildlife Fund Canada, Nature Saskatchewan, Southern Alberta Group for the Environment, Grasslands Naturalists, and Nature Canada.*