

ASSESSING FISHER DISTRIBUTION AND CONNECTIVITY IN THE U.S. ROCKY MOUNTAINS USING NON-INVASIVE GENETIC SAMPLING

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In 2004 the USDI Fish and Wildlife Service responded to a petition to list the West Coast Distinct Population Segment (DPS) of fishers under the ESA. They ruled that the West Coast DPS was “warranted, but precluded” by higher priorities. Fisher are apparently rare in the West Coast, yet they are common in the Northeastern and Midwestern portions of the United States; over 2000 fisher are legally trapped in Maine, New York, and Minnesota each year. In the Rocky Mountains, the only other area of the United States that has fishers, there is little information regarding their distribution and population status. Idaho confers fisher its highest level of protection by listing the species as “critically imperiled” and a Species of Greatest Conservation Need under its Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy. Given recent management concern regarding fishers, multiple agencies, institutions, and organizations have recognized the need to obtain some basic information in the Rocky Mountains. Of primary interest is determining the geographic range of this species within the Rocky Mountains. Current available maps are either too general, e.g., brushstroke maps, and thus contain habitat that is not currently occupied by fisher, or are based on untested habitat relationships or un-screened sighting data. This talk will describe a large-scale, multi-institution effort currently underway to delineate the geographic range of fisher using non-invasive genetic sampling. In addition, preliminary genetic data on the population structure of fishers in the Rocky Mountains will be presented.