

2026 CHANGES TO THE CONSERVATION PRIORITY LIST

Each year, The Livestock Conservancy updates the Conservation Priority List, an annual evaluation of endangered agricultural breeds. The list classifies breeds into increasingly serious classifications: Recovering, Watch, Threatened and Critical.

Census numbers for livestock breeds are gathered from breed associations throughout the year, along with their reports of trends, issues and triumphs. Some landrace breeds don't have formal registries; for those, feedback from a network of relationships with breeders helps carefully craft estimates of breeding populations. Global population estimates are important for "transboundary breeds" – those found in more than one country. Sources of information for global population estimates include international conservation organizations, breed associations, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and university scientists overseas who know the status of certain breeds and breeders in their country.

The information collected provides a rich context for the annual review of each breed on the Conservation Priority List. Using published criteria (found online at <https://bit.ly/CPLparameters>) and information provided by breed associations, breeders and other conservation partners, the status of each breed is carefully reviewed, and appropriate changes are made to the CPL.

The conservation work of many breeders is reflected in the changes seen in the CPL each year, and the 2026 version of the list includes two breeds graduating as well as others changing classifications.

GRADUATES

The **Belgian horse** graduates from the CPL in 2026. It is the most common draft horse breed in the United States, but this was not always the case.

Following several importations from Belgium in the late 1800s, the breed enjoyed tremendous popularity as a draft horse in the U.S. Subsequent importations and active breeding in



The Livestock Conservancy/Jeanette Beranger

The population of Belgian horses, like this team plowing as part of a demonstration at Tiller's International in Michigan, has grown enough to graduate the breed from the Conservation Priority List.

America met the demand. American breeders began to make the "Great Flemish Horse" their own. They selected for a taller, less massive horse than the original type and preferred chestnut and roan colors.

Importations came nearly to a halt after the World Wars in Europe, and American horses were cut off from their Belgian cousins. As with many draft breeds, the popularity of mechanized equipment at this time also led to a decline in demand. Horses that once found a home on farmsteads across America, doing the heavy work of plowing, logging and hauling, were soon replaced by tractors and automobiles.

While modern Belgian horses display a more refined physical appearance than the old Flemish type, they retain the heavy muscle and strong backs of a solid working horse. The breed is gentle, cooperative and willing to work. Its versatility is evident in its many modern-day roles, including sustainable forestry, carriage services, plowing and heavy-pulling competitions, homesteading, recreational riding and therapeutic activities. Today, this type is found almost exclusively in the U.S.

The dedicated work of the Belgian Draft Horse Corporation of America and hundreds of breeders has restored the breed's popularity, making the Belgian, as they call it, "America's Draft Horse Breed Supreme." Thanks to their efforts, Belgian horses graduate from the CPL



The Livestock Conservancy file photo

This Silver Fox buck owned by Jo Mladjenoich is a great example of the breed, which is among new graduates from the Conservation Priority List.

with more than 25,000 horses.

Rabbits were added to the mission of The Livestock Conservancy in 2005, first appearing on the CPL in 2006. Twenty years later, **Silver Fox rabbits** are the first breed of rabbit to graduate from the CPL. First listed in the Critical category in 2006, the impressive growth of Silver Fox rabbits took place through diligent breeding and promotion for both meat production and exhibition. Silver Fox rabbits are an American breed, found nowhere else in the world. Breeders have emphasized selection for growth and body weight, as well as dense fur that characterizes the Silver Fox.

A census conducted by members of the Silver Fox Rabbit Breeders Club in late 2023 found over 3,200 rabbits in rabbitries and on homesteads and small farms across the country. Growth has continued, and as of 2025, more than 1,050 rabbits were shown at national shows in the past five years, and there were 207 registered rabbits.

"This club has worked tirelessly to make this happen and I am thrilled with this accomplishment!" says Hannah Ramirez, president of the Silver Fox Rabbit Breeders Club.

With well over 250 breeders actively raising Silver Fox rabbits, this useful and attractive breed is on secure ground for the future. We applaud the work of the breeders and the breed association.

RABBITS ON THE MOVE

Other rare rabbit breeds have achieved greater popularity in recent years, particularly in the show ring, and this translates to new classifications on the CPL. **American, Blanc de Hotot and Silver rabbits** move from Threatened to Watch. The American rabbit celebrates this move with more than 125 breeders. The rabbits' personable nature, large litters and good meat conformation make them popular as meat rabbits. Blanc de Hotot and Silver continue to climb on the CPL, having moved from Critical to Threatened in 2023. Much of their growth has come from the more than 300 rabbits at national shows over the past five years. Silver rabbits are an ancient breed with three color varieties whose small size makes them easy to care for in a variety of situations, while the Blanc de Hotot is an active and hardy breed prized for its lustrous fur

and attractive eye ring. Each has 40-60 breeders or more.

The Hotot Rabbit Breeders International organization and one Hotot breeder were also among The Livestock Conservancy's Microgrant recipients for 2025-26, receiving funds to improve resources for breeders and rabbitries.

Palomino rabbits move to Recovering on the CPL. They, too, have made a strong showing at national shows in the past five years, with more than 700 rabbits shown and 119 breeders. Palominos were developed in the U.S. in the 20th century. They are a medium-sized rabbit suitable for production or exhibition. The Livestock Conservancy hopes to see their popularity continue to grow.

OTHER CPL CHANGES

Cotswold sheep are one of the longwool breeds of sheep, and are related to Leicester Longwool, Lincoln and Teeswater. They are found in only three countries: the United Kingdom (country of origin), the U.S. and Canada. Cotswold sheep have been in North America since 1832. In the past few years, Canada has registered about 45 sheep per year, and the living population in the U.S. is around 1,100. In the U.K., the estimated number of registered purebred breeding ewes has declined from 833 in 2020 to 680 in 2025. These trends are troubling, and with a global population now under 2,000, Cotswolds move from Threatened to Critical in 2026. Nevertheless, there is hope that strong populations can be maintained in the U.S. thanks to the strength of the two breed organizations.

In addition to their long lustrous wool, Cotswolds are large-framed sheep suitable for meat production. Thanks to their slow growth, even older animals are flavorful. The wool takes dye well, and is suitable for creating worsted yarns and durable woven fabrics.

The **Rocky Mountain and Mountain Pleasure horses** have been linked on the list for many, many years due to their close genetic relationship. After much discussion and consideration, The Livestock Conservancy has decided to unlink the Mountain Pleasure and the Rocky Mountain Horse on the CPL out of respect for their long and continuing history under separate associations and registries. Mountain Pleasure horses move to Critical, while Rocky Mountain horses remain in Threatened. Both Mountain Pleasure and Rocky Mountain horses are valued as saddle horses, with a smooth gait and calm disposition. They are versatile and reliable on the trail, at work and in the riding ring.

NEW TO THE CPL

Shetland ducks originated on the Shetland Islands of Great Britain, where very few remain. Today, a number of U.S. farms report having Shetland ducks, including Crown Point Ecology Center of Akron, Ohio. Crown Point's Executive Director, Ian Roberts, describes the Shetland as a traditional domestic duck of the Shetland Islands that developed as a crofting landrace rather than a standardized exhibition breed. Long-term selection within small mixed-farm systems on the islands emphasized hardiness,

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Shetland ducks are a new addition to the Conservation Priority List, classified as Critical.

The Livestock Conservancy file photo

The graduation of Southdown sheep from the CPL is a perfect example of the impact of The Livestock Conservancy's Shave 'Em to Save 'Em program.

Launched five years ago, this fiber initiative pairs hundreds of heritage breed shepherds with thousands of fiber artists across America. These wool purchases directly support heritage

sheep conservation and help save breeds facing extinction. Certainly, SE2 fiber artists get some of the credit for the breed's success.

"Saving breeds takes wise breeding practices, careful stewardship, collaboration and establishing a market niche for the breed and its products or services," says Alison Martin, program

director for The Livestock Conservancy. "It also requires years of effort and dedication. We're grateful for the many breed stewards who accomplished this for the 14 breeds that have now graduated from the CPL, as well as those who continue to invest their expertise and efforts in breeds currently on that journey." ■



The Livestock Conservancy/Jeanette Beranger

Highland cattle



Don Bixby

Friesian horse

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selection within small mixed-farm systems on the islands emphasized hardiness, efficient foraging, broodiness and dependable egg production under exposed maritime conditions. The U.S. population has now grown to just under 200 birds managed by a dedicated group of breeders, and it continues to expand each year. The Shetland duck joins the CPL in the Critical category.

LOOKING FORWARD

Although we're always pleased to report good news on the CPL, in 2026 we will also be keeping a watchful eye on breeding populations of certain breeds as some long-time breeders reduce their herds and flocks. Succession planning is a critically important and sometimes challenging phase for breeders who can no longer participate in conservation breeding at the levels they once did, and dispersal of breeding herds and flocks remains a threat to rare breeds.

Livestock Conservancy members and breeders can take great pride in the conservation successes that contributed to the changes in the 2026 CPL. We thank our members for promoting, breeding and raising rare breeds of farm animals and poultry throughout the country, ensuring their genetic continuity.

The entire 2026 Conservation Priority List is included in a convenient, pull-out section beginning on page 12 of this issue of *The Livestock Conservancy Newsletter*. ■

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