

U.S. plans to boost 'critical habitat' acreage to help rare shrew

3:35 PM, July 9, 2009

Chalk one up for the Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed today to review and redesignate habitat crucial to the survival of



the tiny, nocturnal insect eater with beady eyes and long snout found in only four places along a 70-mile stretch of the western edge of Kern County, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Under the Bush administration, the agency in 2004 had proposed 4,649 acres of "critical habitat" for the shrew but reduced it to merely 84 acres a year later, said Ileene Anderson, a spokeswoman for the environmental group.

As a result of a lawsuit filed by the group, the agency agreed to re-propose the 4,649 acres within the next 90 days and issue a designation of critical habitat on or before March 22, 2012.

"This settlement is an important victory for the Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew and California's invaluable wetlands in the arid San Joaquin Valley," Anderson said in a statement. "The agreement requires that the agency that is supposed to be protecting this rare mammal take a hard look at what is needed — not only to keep this unique animal from extinction but to increase the population to levels that ensure its survival."

Only a few dozen of the shrews, which were first identified by scientists in 1932, are believed to exist in the wild. About 5% of their historic haunts surrounding Tulare, Buena Vista, Kern and Goose lakes in the southern Central Valley remain intact.

-- Louis Sahagun

Photo: A Buena Vista Lake ornate shrew. Credit: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service