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Endangered Species Draw Lawsuit

The Center for Biological Diversity and Earthjustice sued the federal government today over its designation of protected habitat for 13 species across the country, including four found in the San Diego region.

The environmental groups' lawsuit alleges that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's decision-making process was politically motivated and engineered by Julie MacDonald, a former Interior Department official. She resigned earlier this year after a federal auditor found that she had bullied the service's scientists into minimizing protections for endangered species.

The suit specifically challenges the federal government's designation of what is called "critical habitat" -- land considered vital to conserving an endangered species. Four species included in the suit still live in San Diego County: the arroyo toad, a small amphibian, as well as three plants, San Diego ambrosia, spreading navarretia and thread-leaved brodiaea. A fifth species, the California red-legged frog, has historically been found in the county but no longer is.

Jane Hendron, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman in Carlsbad, declined comment on the suit's specifics, but said the service has agreed in July to review eight decisions MacDonald made -- including habitat designations for the arroyo toad and red-legged frog.

"One of the questions I would have is how the species benefit from a lawsuit where we have to divert resources to litigation," Hendron said, "when we already said we were going to review those decisions."

Kieran Suckling, policy director at the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, said the federal government has not followed up on its July promise to review MacDonald's decision.

"They keep using the word review," Suckling said. "These decisions need to be withdrawn. And that's what we're asking for. What is the Fish and Wildlife Service doing? They have just cynically suggested that some vague action will occur at some vague point in the future. And that's just not good enough."

-- ROB DAVIS