

Big Bear Grizzly

Center to sue federal government

By KATHY PORTIE

Wednesday, September 5, 2007 6:03 PM PDT

Less than three months after the bald eagle was removed from the federal endangered species list, the Center for Biological Diversity is up in arms. The new battle has nothing to do with the eagle, but with what the center calls political interference with 55 other endangered species of plants and animals in 28 states.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a formal notice of intent to sue the United States Department of Interior over the issue. It is the largest substantive legal action in the 34-year history of the Endangered Species Act. Kieran Suckling, policy director for the center, lists several reasons for the suit, including the government's illegal removal of one animal from the list, the refusal to place three animals on the list, proposals to remove or downgrade protection of seven animals and stripping protection from 8.7 million acres of critical habitat in 28 states.

While the Big Bear Valley is not included on the center's critical habitat list, a successful lawsuit by the center could mean changes. "If there are any of these species present or recently present (locally), then the Big Bear area would have to be reviewed," Suckling said.

Twenty-four of the species can be found in California. Those familiar to the San Bernardino National Forest region include the Arroyo southwestern toad, Coachella milk-vetch, the Santa Ana sucker, the Quino checkerspot butterfly, the Southwestern willow flycatcher and the California red-legged frog.

According to Marc Stamer, biologist for the San Bernardino National Forest, the milk-vetch is mainly in the front country and San Jacinto districts. The front country of the San Bernardino National Forest is west of Interstate 15 in the Lytle Creek area.

The Southwestern willow flycatcher has been seen in all three districts of the San Bernardino National Forest and the checkerspot butterfly can be found in the San Jacinto district. "The arroyo toad is in all three districts," Stamer said. "Historically the red-legged frog was on two districts, but it is no longer known. The Santa Ana sucker was historically in the front country, but as of right now we don't know of any on the forest."

Many of the center's accusations are the result of decisions by Julie McDonald, the former deputy assistant secretary of the Interior who resigned under fire in March. But Suckling said she isn't the only one doing the wrong thing in the department. He accuses the Bush administration of using McDonald as a scapegoat and downplaying the infractions.

"They say there were eight decisions that (McDonald) messed up," Suckling said. "This is rubbish. She overruled hundreds of positions by government scientists. But there are far more bad actors up there. She's just one of many. We're trying to expose how completely the disdain for science and for wildlife pervades the Bush administration's endangered species program."

For more information on the Center for Biological Diversity and its charge against the Department of Interior, visit the Web site www.biologicaldiversity.org.