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Endangered-species suit planned

By Seattle Times staff and news services

TUCSON, Ariz. — An environmental organization served notice Tuesday that it intends to sue a federal agency over 55 endangered species in 28 states and seek restoration of 8.7 million acres of protected habitat.

The suit includes two birds found in Western Washington: the marbled murrelet and the Western snowy plover.

The Center for Biological Diversity said its formal notice of intent to sue the Interior Department is the starting point for the largest legal action in the history of the 34-year-old Endangered Species Act.

The action accuses the federal government of illegally removing one animal from the endangered-species list, refusing to put three animals on the list and proposing to downgrade or remove protection from seven others.

In addition, it contends that the government's actions stripped protection from 8.7 million acres of critical habitat for a range of plant and animal species from Texas to Washington state.

In the case of the marbled murrelet, the organization contends the government manipulated a scientific review to make it look like the bird didn't need further federal protection. The government also

illegally shrank the amount of critical habitat for the Western snowy plover by exaggerating the economic costs involved in the protections, said Kieran Suckling, a spokesman for the center.

Federal law requires filing a notice of intent to sue before a lawsuit can be instituted.

The Tucson-based center claims that Bush administration appointees made the decision based on politics and not science.

Jeff Humphrey, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Phoenix, did not immediately return a call seeking comment Tuesday.