

# Habitat reduced for two species

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AP file photo

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service announcement affects the coastal California gnatcatcher.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced major cutbacks yesterday in the amount of habitat it deemed essential for protecting two imperiled species in San Diego County.

Its ruling could, among other things, speed construction of a hotly contested toll road between San Diego and Orange counties.

The agency's lowered habitat figures also continue the Bush administration's trend of shrinking areas designated as "critical habitat." The term refers to land with conservation requirements that long have been disputed between developers and environmentalists.

Yesterday's announcement affects the San Diego fairy shrimp and the coastal California gnatcatcher. These species have been the focus of lawsuits for years, and the agency's latest decision could spur more litigation.

Fish and Wildlife officials said they have classified 3,082 acres in various spots in San Diego and Orange counties as critical habitat for the fairy shrimp. That figure is about half of what the agency proposed in 2003 as a result of previous litigation.

For the coastal gnatcatcher, the agency designated 169,837 acres in five Southern California counties as critical habitat. Four years ago, Fish and Wildlife officials had proposed about 495,000 acres.

"It's good news that there is some protection ... but overall the decisions are a local example of a national assault by the Bush administration on all things related to the protection of endangered species and habitat," said David Hogan, who represents the San Diego area for the national Center for Biological Diversity.

Hogan said there's a "very real possibility" his group would challenge the Fish and Wildlife Service ruling in court, but that it was too soon to decide.

The Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency in Orange County was among the organizations that challenged the Fish and Wildlife Service's habitat designations for the two species in 2000.

"Some of the analysis initially was not done correctly," said spokeswoman Jennifer Seaton.

She also said some of the federal land eyed for the proposed state Route 241 avoided the critical-habitat label in the latest revisions. That land, which belongs to Camp Pendleton, still is subject to the base's environmental standards and requirements from agencies such as the California Coastal Commission.

"This does potentially have some regulatory benefit for streamlining the process," Seaton said.

Critical habitat is a term used by the federal government for public and private lands that may require special management to safeguard certain species. The main impact is that it forces landowners to gain approval from the Fish and Wildlife Service on projects that involve federal permits or funding.

In their announcement yesterday, the agency's officials said some lands formerly deemed as critical habitat for the

gnatcatcher and fairy shrimp were removed because they no longer are seen as essential to the species' survival.

The downsizing was based on factors such as the agency's use of more precise maps, comments from the public and various changes in the natural landscape, said Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service office in Carlsbad.

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**Affected species**

**San Diego fairy shrimp**

-Critical habitat proposed in 2003: 6,098 acres

Amount designated yesterday: 3,082 acres

**Coastal California gnatcatcher**

-Critical habitat proposed in 2003: 495,795 acres

Amount designated yesterday: 169,837 acres

*SOURCE: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service*