

# Wildlife agency agrees to revisit protections for rare Mojave Desert plant

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By [Abby Sewell](#), staff writer

BARSTOW — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed Monday to consider new protections for the habitat of a rare plant that grows only in the Mojave Desert in and around Fort Irwin.

The Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit environmental advocacy group, sued the Fish and Wildlife Service in an attempt to make the department reconsider an April 2005 decision not to designate any critical habitat for the Lane Mountain milk-vetch plant, a flowering perennial in the pea family. The plant, which was placed on the endangered species list in 1998, grows only in a 20-mile strip of land, a majority of which is located within the newly expanded boundaries of Fort Irwin, said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

In April 2005, the Fish and Wildlife Service released its decision not to designate any critical habitat for the plant. Designating areas as critical habitat would require more evaluation of the activities that could take place on parts of Fort Irwin and on Bureau of Land Management land where the milk-vetch grows.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the Fish and Wildlife Service in late 2007, stating that the decision not to designate critical habitat violated the Endangered Species Act. Anderson said the milk-vetch is important to the desert ecosystem because it converts nitrogen into a natural fertilizer that enriches the dry desert soil.

“That is a really important component, particularly in the desert soil, where there’s just not a lot of nutrients in the soil to begin with,” she said.

In its response to the complaint, the Fish and Wildlife Service admitted the value of the Lane Mountain milk-vetch to the desert ecosystem but denied that the survival of other desert plants depends on the milk-vetch or that failure to designate critical habitat would result in the milk-vetch going extinct.

Connie Rutherford, plant listing and recovery coordinator with the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Office, said no critical habitat was designated originally, partially because Fort Irwin had already completed a resource management plan outlining how it would protect the milk-vetch. The BLM has also taken measures to protect the plant, including closing some roads, she said.

Anderson said her group would like to see the milk-vetch habitat off limits for training exercises involving heavy equipment at Fort Irwin.

“We would like Fort Irwin not to run over the plants with tanks,” she said.

Fort Irwin already has a Fish and Wildlife Service-approved natural resources management plan in place, which lays out ways in which the base will attempt to protect the milk-vetch, spokesman John Wagstaffe said. Because of that, he said a critical habitat designation would not affect the base in its operations. Wagstaffe said he believes that training exercises in the milk-vetch habitat area are currently limited.

In addition, Anderson said her group would like to see a reduced number of roads on the BLM land in the milk-vetch habitat area to restrict access by off-roaders.

The settlement signed by the Fish and Wildlife Service is not a promise to designate critical habitat but simply a commitment to reexamine its April 2005 decision. The agency agreed to come out with a final critical habitat designation in April 2011.

Fish and Wildlife Service representatives said the final decision may or may not be any different from the one released in 2005.

“We’re willing to start with a fresh slate here and look at any information submitted by the public and by the agencies involved,” Rutherford said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service also agreed to pay \$6,762 to cover the Center for Biological Diversity’s attorney’s fees and other costs of litigation.

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