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Habitat in Rota to be set for bird

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HONOLULU (AP) -- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is setting aside land in the Northern Mariana Islands as critical habitat for an endangered bird species as part of an agreement to settle a federal lawsuit, officials said Wednesday.

Final designation of the habitat for the Rota bridled white-eye is expected by Sept. 7, 2006. Acreage has not been determined.

In the agreement, the Fish and Wildlife Service conceded that it violated the federal Endangered Species Act by not setting aside land for the white-eye when the bird was added to the endangered list in January, said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Center, assisted by the environmental legal group Earthjustice, sued the Bush administration in May to force the agency to set aside the land.

"We hope that it's not too late to save the white-eye," Suckling said in a news release.

Gina Shultz, acting supervisor for endangered species with the Fish and

Wildlife Service's Pacific region, said the agency has limited funds and places a higher priority on listing species as endangered.

"We think that listing it provides it more protection than designating critical habitat," she said. In January, she said, "We did not have funds available to designate critical habitat."

The Rota bridled white-eye is a yellowish bird with a yellow-orange bill, legs and feet. The average size is about 4 inches and about one-third of an ounce. It is found only on the Northern Mariana island of Rota and is a close relative to the Guam bridled white-eye, which is believed to be extinct, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Fred Amidon, a fish and wildlife biologist with the agency, said the white-eye population was about 10,000 in 1982, but has dwindled to about 1,000 based on 1999 estimates.

Factors for its decline include habitat change because of disasters such as typhoons, development and the introduction of predatory animals such as rats and larger birds, Amidon said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service agreed

to come up with proposed critical habitat by Sept. 7, 2005, with final designation coming by the following year.

Once designated, critical habitat must be managed in a way that ensures the recovery of a species, and federal agencies are barred from approving or funding any actions that adversely affect the land, Earthjustice said.