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Feds may step in to protect bug's shrinking habitat

Benjamin Spillman , The Desert Sun

A dusty-brown and cream-colored beetle limited to just 600 acres of remaining habitat in Palm Springs could get protection from the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it will consider listing Casey's June beetle at the urging of environmental groups that want to preserve the rare insect.

A threatened or endangered designation by the federal government could lead to restrictions on people who want to disturb the beetle's habitat, an area that includes the rustic Smoke Tree Ranch development.

"It is much too early to even go down that road," said Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service. "We may conclude the listing of the species is not warranted."

Although not widely known among the general public, beetle enthusiasts say the bug is an important and entertaining member of the Coachella Valley insect community.

It lives most of its life underground, emerging for just a few weeks in the spring to mate.

During that time the male flies just inches above the ground using large,

feather-shaped antennae to "sniff" for females.

"This is their one and only chance for sex," Cameron Barrows, director of the Coachella Valley Preserve, said of the short mating season.

Development has covered much of the beetle's limited habitat with sod and pavement, Barrows said. Exterior lighting and pools pose a hazard for beetles, too. The males can be distracted by lights or trapped in pools.

"They basically confuse them and keep them from being able to do their thing," Barrows said of the distraction.

The decision to consider the listing was prompted by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club. The two groups submitted a petition to the government in 2004. Hendron said a subsequent lawsuit pushed the service to act on the petition. It will be at least a year before the service decides whether listing is warranted and another year to actually grant protections, Hendron said.