

Environmental News Service

Major Cut Proposed for Marbled Murrelet Habitat

PORTLAND, Oregon, September 12, 2006 (ENS) - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has proposed cutting designated critical habitat for the marbled murrelet, a threatened Pacific seabird, by more than 90 percent. The federal agency said the drastic reduction is warranted because much of the habitat identified as vital to the survival of the robin-sized seabird is protected by other existing regulations and plans.

"The implementation of various management plans in the Pacific Northwest already provides protection for murrelet habitat and makes the designation of critical habitat redundant," said Ren Lohofener, acting director of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Region. "Our proposal recognizes the value of these efforts and encourages landowners and organizations to continue these endeavors for long-term conservation."

Environmentalists criticized the proposal and said it would jeopardize the marbled murrelet's chance of recovery in the Pacific Northwest.

"Normally, some reductions in habitat protections might be expected when an threatened animal is recovering," said Susan Ash of Audubon Society of Portland. "Inexplicably, the Bush administration is proposing to remove most protections at a time when scientists predict the murrelet is nearing extinction in the Pacific Northwest."

Some studies predict the small seabirds, which use the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest for nesting and rearing their young, could be extinct within 40-50 years.

The Pacific Northwest population of the species was listed as "threatened" under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1992.



The marbled murrelet spends much of its time in the marine environment, but depends on old growth forests for nesting and breeding. (Photo courtesy [FWS](#))

The listing was in response to the loss of nesting habitat from logging and urbanization, as well as mortality associated with gill-net fisheries and air pollution.

The revised proposal issued Tuesday by the Fish and Wildlife Service calls for the designation of 221,692 acres of critical habitat for the population within portions of California, Oregon and Washington.

The agency originally identified 3,590,642 acres in the three states as critical habitat, but has proposed the exclusion of 3,368,950 acres already protected under other existing regulations or plans, such as the Northwest Forest Plan, state and tribal management plans and habitat conservation plans. No marine areas are protected under the proposal.

After the exclusions, approximately 1 percent of the proposed area is federal land, 80 percent is city, county or state land, and 19 percent is private land.

Conservation groups note that federally owned public lands contain some 90 percent of the habitat vital for the survival of marbled murrelets in the Pacific Northwest.

They contend the Bush administration is also trying to weaken the very regulations - such as the Northwest Forest Plan - it says protects the murrelet's habitat and makes critical habitat designation unnecessary.

"It is hypocritical, not to say illegal, for the Fish and Wildlife Service to defer to supposed protections in a forest plan that is under attack," said Doug Heiken of the Oregon Natural Resources Council.

"Scientific studies have shown that critical habitat is vital for recovery," added Noah Greenwald, a conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Species with critical habitat are nearly twice as likely to be improving than species without. The Fish and Wildlife Service should be working to restore our murrelets, not drive them extinct."

But the Fish and Wildlife Service is unsure if the species needs any federal protection. The agency is working on a proposal to delist the species entirely, a move made possible by a controversial 2004 decision that found the Pacific Northwest population of marbled murrelets is not distinct from populations in Alaska and Canada.

The ruling refuted opinions by regional officials with the Fish and Wildlife Service and independent scientists.

The review that allowed the ruling was prompted by the settlement of a 2002 suit by the timber industry challenging the listing of the species.

The private environmental consulting firm in Seattle hired by the agency to conduct the scientific review of the birds' status found the Pacific Northwest population of the species has declined some 10 percent since 1992 and warned it could be extinct within 40 years.

The total Pacific Northwest population of the elusive birds is estimated at some 24,000 - the region covers 18 percent of the entire species' historic range.

More than 860,000 marbled murrelets are believed to exist in Alaska, with an additional 66,000 reported in Canada.

The draft review of the species status by the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Northwest Regional Office concluded that marbled murrelets in the Pacific Northwest are distinct from populations in Alaska and Canada and also questioned the effectiveness of Canada's protection of the species.

But those findings were rejected by agency officials in Washington, D.C, who contend the Pacific Northwest marbled murrelets are not genetically, ecologically or behaviorally distinct from their Alaskan and Canadian cousins.

The Fish and Wildlife Service will take public comment on the habitat proposal until November 13. It will issue a final by August 2007.