

The Salt Lake Tribune

APRIL 13, 2006

Milkvetches: The plants are found only in S. Utah and N. Arizona

By JOE BAIRD
The Salt Lake Tribune

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has issued a proposal to create designated critical habitat for a pair of nearly extinct wildflowers that are found only in the St. George area and just over the state line in Arizona.

The two plant species - the Holmgren milkvetch and the Shivwits milkvetch - are threatened by the exploding growth and development of the area. Two conservation groups filed suit against the federal agency in September of 2004 for failing to follow through in protecting the plants under guidelines of the Endangered Species Act. The Fish and Wildlife Service proposal is part of the lawsuit settlement.

"The local Fish and Wildlife Service staff has done a very good job on this proposal," Tony Frates, conservation co-chair of the Utah Native Plant Society, said Wednesday. "But they would not have been authorized nor directed to do this [unless] the lawsuit was filed and settled."

With all the population growth in the area, he added, "we had to press for this sooner rather than later."

Specifically, the two plant species are in the path of a planned freeway interchange and roadway in St. George's south corridor that would link the city with its proposed new airport and a planned community.

The Holmgren milkvetch and Shivwits milkvetch were placed on

the endangered list in September of 2001 by the Fish and Wildlife Service, which is charged with recovering plant and animal species under the Endangered Species Act. But the agency's failure to designate critical habitat - due to a lack of funds, agency officials said - sparked the lawsuit, filed by the Utah Native Plant Society and the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials did not immediately return a call Wednesday afternoon. But according to the proposal, the agency has identified three populations of the Holmgren milkvetch and five populations of the Shivwits milkvetch.

All known populations of the Holmgren milkvetch occur within 10 miles of St. George and in Mojave County, Ariz. All known populations of the Shivwits milkvetch exist in Washington County.

One of the largest Holmgren milkvetch populations exist on land owned by the School Institution and Trust Land Administration. Agency officials were not available for comment.