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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

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## Group files to list Pacific fisher

by JANE KAY

*Chronical Environment Writer*

A furry forest mammal whose numbers may be down to 850 in California deserves protection under the state's Endangered Species Act, an environmental group said in a petition filed Wednesday.

The Center for Biological Diversity is asking the state Department of Fish and Game to protect the Pacific fisher, charging that the federal government has turned its back on the chocolate-brown-coated creature that lives under big trees.

The elusive Pacific fisher, closely related to otters, martens, wolverines and weasels, is seldom seen by humans. Researchers have been warning for nearly 20 years that it is disappearing and perilously close to extinction as the timber industry continues logging and road building that eliminate forest habitat.

If the state decided to protect the animal, it could do so in three months. The state Fish and Game Commission makes the final decision based on recommendations from the department.

A listing would have the effect of limiting logging in the fisher's territory, some on private timber lands and national forests in Del Norte, Humboldt, Siskiyou and Trinity counties and in the southern Sierra Nevada. A small population exists in southern Oregon.

Before the destruction of old-growth and other giant forests, the fishers made dens and foraged for small mammals and birds beneath vast canopies of branches across the Sierra Nevada and the Pacific Northwest. In California, they occupy half the range that they did 75 years ago, according to U.S. Forest Service researchers.

The fisher, once trapped in great numbers for its lush fur, has a long, slender body with short legs, a bushy tail, a triangular head and large, rounded ears. Males weigh about 10 pounds; females weigh about 5 pounds.

They have been wiped out in most of Oregon and Washington because of logging, researchers say, leaving fishers in Northern California isolated from mating with fishers in the rest of North America. Females don't bear young every year and, when they do, produce only one to four offspring. The birthrates can be affected by cold,

heavy snow and drought as well as diminished habitat, researchers say.

The environmental group first petitioned the federal government to list the animal under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 2000. In 2004, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service declared that the fisher warranted listing, but had neither the time nor money to list it or some 200 other species. The Center for Biological Diversity sued the government in a challenge of that decision, and the case remains in the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C.

The fisher had some protections under a federal policy, released in 2001, that guided logging and other activities in the Sierra Nevada, according to Paul Spitler, public lands director for the Center for Biological Diversity. In 2004, the Bush administration released a rewritten version of the plan that the state and the environmental group are challenging in court, he said.

"There is no safety net left for the fisher," said Spitler. The group is seeking state protection, he said, because "we were just tired of waiting for the federal government to act."