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Ariz. cactus to remain on species list

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TUCSON, Ariz. — A cactus that has been a thorn in the side of southern Arizona developers for more than a decade will remain under federal protection after a review of the plant's status.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recent decision to keep the Pima pineapple cactus on the federal endangered species list means that new developments will have to save open space for it in fast-growing Tucson suburbs.

Some private biologists had argued that the Pima pineapple cactus is far more common than previously estimated and should be lumped with other, more common pineapple cacti varieties.

But wildlife service officials said two studies from a private consulting firm questioning the listing were faulted by the federal agency's scientists and all but one of 14 outside scientists.

For one, the service said, the consultants used cactus survey methods that would tend to "bias" the survey data toward making the population seem more abundant than it is. The species lives only in southern and southeastern Arizona and in part of Mexico.

Bob Schmalzel, a biologist for the private firm, defended both of WestLand Resources' studies. The population data they provided "constitutes the best scientific and commercial data currently available," Schmalzel said. It provides substantially more information than was available at the time of its listing in 1993, Schmalzel said.

Since its listing, developers of homes, shopping centers, schools, prisons and other projects have set aside about 4,058 acres of cactus habitat in the Tucson area and bladed 4,481 acres, service records show.

Numerous pineapple cacti have been transplanted by builders from bulldozers' paths.

A Tucson environmental group applauded the service's decision.

Greta Anderson of the Center for Biological Diversity said the cactus is clearly a case in which threats to its survival are increasing and the science supports its uniqueness as a species.

But **Anderson** pointed out that the cactus still lacks a recovery plan to chart its future course. **She said** that so much of the plant's habitat is disappearing that she can't be optimistic about it.