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Plant won't get habitat designation

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BARSTOW -- Partly to accommodate Fort Irwin's needs, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has decided not to designate land to conserve a rare plant related to the pea.

Representatives of environmental groups were upset after hearing the news last week that lands where the Lane Mountain milkvetch grows north of Barstow will not receive critical habitat designation.

However, federal officials said there are a number of steps being taken to protect the perennial herb, which is an endangered species.

The Fish & Wildlife Service's Ventura office began studying the possible designation of three separate areas totaling 29,522 acres last year.

Most of those acres were excluded because they were either Fort Irwin or U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands.

"The military lands are being excluded for national security reasons," Fish & Wildlife Service spokeswoman Lois Grunwald said.

As for the BLM lands, Grunwald said the service is going to leave Lane Mountain milkvetch protection in those areas up to the bureau, which has provisions for the plant in its recently released West Mojave Plan.

A little over 4,300 acres of private land had also been proposed for designation, but the Army has

purchased or will purchase much of it, officials said.

Reactions vary on milkvetch decision

Ileene Anderson, Southern California botanist for the California Native Plant Society, said Friday that she was disappointed to hear that habitat will not be designated for the Lane Mountain milkvetch. Her group is dedicated to protecting plants.

"I'm outraged," Anderson said. "They're basically dooming the plant to remain at the population level that it currently is, and not giving it any opportunity for recovery, and that isn't going to achieve the spirit of the (Endangered Species) Act."

Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist at the Center for Biological Diversity, called the decision "blatantly political" and accused Bush appointees and the Pentagon for denying the plant protection.

"It's also another case where the Bush administration is going to force an issue back into the courts," Patterson, whose group frequently sues the government, said.

On the other hand, one long-time resident who lives near Fort Irwin, Jean Lint, said she supports the post, its expansion and its training needs and wouldn't want to see the milkvetch get in its way.

"I believe in protecting things, but to

me the environmentalists have just gone too far," Lint, 78, said. "We've got all these young men over there dying ... The military should have first preference of what they need and not have a bunch of people telling them what they can and can't do."

BLM, Fort Irwin plans

Both the Army and BLM have existing and future provisions to take care of the milkvetches, officials said.

At Fort Irwin, the post has put fences around some populations of milkvetches, Mike McCrary, Fish & Wildlife Service listing and recovery coordinator, said.

"That keeps the plants protected," McCrary said. "(And) there's some other areas where they have restricted what they do where the plant occurs -- limited what they do to staying on existing dirt roads and not driving tanks there."

As part of Fort Irwin's expansion plan, the Army agreed to acquire the private property that contains Lane Mountain milkvetches, BLM wildlife biologist Larry LaPre said.

"They will ultimately give that to BLM," LaPre said. "So all of the milkvetches will be either on Army or BLM land."

BLM's West Mojave Plan contains protections for the milkvetches that include the creation of two "areas of critical environmental concern" for the plants.

Land use will be restricted in those conservation areas to ensure the milkvetches aren't jeopardized, LaPre said.

For example, he said if somebody with a mining claim wanted to dig in one of the areas of critical environmental concern, the person would need to show that no milkvetches would be harmed -- not an easy task.

Also, he said BLM rangers visit such conservation areas more frequently than other areas, increasing the chances that someone harming the milkvetches would be caught.

The route designations in the West Mojave Plan also closed a number of small dirt roads going through milkvetch areas.

"We closed parallel roads and dead-end roads and roads that didn't go anywhere and left open the primary dirt roads and access to private property," LaPre said.

Anderson said she's not convinced that either Fort Irwin or BLM will ultimately be able to protect the milkvetch adequately. She noted that the West Mojave Plan hasn't received final approval yet, and she hasn't seen a final environmental impact statement for the post's expansion.