

Shorebird recovery plan relies on public

Snowy plover goals too low, activists say

By Mike Lee

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service yesterday released a species recovery plan that stresses efforts by the public to keep the Western snowy plover from becoming extinct.

The sparrow-sized shorebird lives on sandy beaches from Baja California to Washington, including several sites in San Diego County. About 28 major nesting areas remain in the habitat range, and they often are fenced off during the nesting season to keep out people and dogs.



Associated Press file photo
The Western snowy plover
breeds on the Pacific Coast.

Protection measures

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service seeks help from conservation groups and others to implement a long-term recovery plan for Western snowy plovers. Recommended actions include:

- Monitoring populations of snowy plovers.
- Eliminating threats to the bird's survival.
- Educating the public.
- Coordinating preservation activities with Mexico.

Conducting scientific investigations.

The plan, finalized about six years after it was proposed, pegged the cost of implementation at \$150 million. If it is successful, the Western snowy plover could be removed from the federal endangered species list by 2047.

Some environmentalists are wary of the blueprint, saying the agency's population target of 3,000 breeding adults isn't aggressive enough. Currently, about 2,100 snowy plover adults breed along the Pacific Coast from March to September.

“It’s very unlikely that the plover could recover with goals this low. This is not a recovery plan. It’s an extinction plan,” said Kieran Suckling, policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson.

Other conservationists warned that voluntary efforts alone won't save the snowy plover, which had declined largely because of recreation and development at beaches.

“This recovery plan is full of good intentions, but without funding for ongoing recovery programs or regulatory protections, it is unlikely to provide the help that this important threatened species deserves,” said Glenn Olson, executive director of Audubon California. “We are long past the point with this species where cooperation and volunteerism alone can make a difference. We need a plan with some teeth.”

Audubon leaders said a draft version of a related document would weaken federal oversight of the snowy plover and relax controls on development and recreation. Federal officials could not say when that document would be finished and what shape it ultimately would take.

A Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman said the agency's recovery blueprint emphasizes public involvement because the birds live on beaches where people also flock.

“(Many) species tend to exist in lightly used or lightly populated areas, so you work with a small number of landowners and some interest groups to implement recovery actions,” said Al Donner, a spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Sacramento.

“In contrast, the plover exists for the most part . . . in areas where you have a tremendous human presence, so . . . it’s got to be the people who recreate on and enjoy the beach who step up,” he said.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials encouraged organizations such as the Audubon Society and the Boy Scouts to continue helping the birds through research, public awareness efforts and removal of invasive plants that destroy nesting areas.

“These groups can provide large networks of volunteers who can be mobilized to assist public resource agencies,” the plan said.

Optional efforts, as opposed to regulations, have been promoted by the Bush administration under the catch phrase of “cooperative conservation.”

Suckling questioned whether the Fish and Wildlife Service's reliance on public involvement was really a novel approach to helping the snowy plover.

“This is more or less the same as what they usually do,” Suckling said of the agency's 292-page plan.