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UF scientist all aflutter over butterfly Professor says Bush administration is keeping a species off the endangered list.

By David Fleshler
Tallahassee Bureau

A well-known scientist at the University of Florida on Thursday accused the Bush administration of misrepresenting his work in order to justify its decision not to put the Miami Blue butterfly on the endangered-species list.

Once common throughout South Florida, the butterfly was reduced to a single stronghold in the Florida Keys before scientists last year began re-establishing it in parts of its old range.

In May the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it could not declare the Miami Blue an endangered species, even though the butterfly met the criteria, because it lacked the staff and money to protect it. The Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit group based in Tucson, Ariz., on Thursday filed a 60-day notice of intent to sue the service over the decision.

In announcing its decision, the wildlife service claimed that scientists had failed in their attempts to reintroduce the butterfly to its former range.

Since releasing Miami Blues at Biscayne and Everglades national parks, researchers detected only "an inconsistent or sporadic presence of only a small number of individuals," stated the agency's written evaluation, published May 11 in the Federal Register. "Monitoring results do not indicate that the Miami Blue has become established at any of the release sites."

Thomas Emmel, professor of zoology and entomology at the University of Florida and director of the Miami Blue reintroduction project, said this assess-

ment was completely false.

"That's just plain Bush administration manipulation of the data," he exclaimed, after hearing the service's evaluation of his team's work. "That's just another example of how politics drives biological observations."

Emmel said his team has established 12 breeding colonies at Biscayne and Everglades national parks.

These colonies have all successfully reproduced through several generations in the wild. The total number of butterflies in the colonies ranges from about 50 to 500, with numbers hitting the low end of the range when most of the butterflies are in their larval stage.

"The reintroduction efforts are going quite well," Emmel said.

He accused the Fish and Wildlife Service of deliberately minimizing the success of the team's work in order to make it appear that it would be too difficult to save the butterfly.

"What they're trying to do is justify why they're not supporting this," he said. "It's an attempt to suppress knowledge of any recovery of a new species."

Emmel, author of 35 books, is among the world's leading experts on butterflies. He is director of the University of Florida's McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity, which holds the world's second largest collection of butterflies and moths.

Barely the size of a quarter, the Miami Blue began disappearing in the 1980s, probably because of urban develop-

ment, mosquito spraying and the decline of native ants that protected the butterflies from predators.

Tom MacKenzie, spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said he lacked the information to address Emmel's complaint about the scientific data. He said the wildlife service wanted to protect the Miami Blue but lacked the money to do it, given the number of other species that needed protection. He noted that the Miami Blue was placed on the "candidate species" list, which means listing is warranted but precluded by other priorities.

"We feel it needs to be on the list," he said. "There's a lot of different priorities, and priorities need to be set." The wildlife service is currently dealing with 35 lawsuits over the listings of 57 species, preventing it from devoting as much time as it would like to proposals to add additional species to the list.

"We're not listing it due to other conflicting priorities," MacKenzie said.

MacKenzie said he had no information on the service's budget for listing or protecting endangered species.

Had the service designated the Miami Blue as an endangered species, the federal government would have to implement a recovery plan and protect critical habitat. Federal agencies would be required to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service before taking any actions that could affect the butterfly.

Jeff Miller, wildlands coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the Bush administration has deliberately kept funding low for the wildlife service to keep it from protecting additional species. "There's been a deliberate attempt, especially during the Bush administration, to starve the listing budget," he said. "Species that should be protected are falling by the wayside, and some species are actually going extinct while they're waiting on the candidate list."