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Wildlife officials drop habitat plan, cite homeland security issues

FORT IRWIN: The Lane Mountain milk-vetch is losing its protection as the Army base expands.

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Bowing to national security concerns, federal wildlife officials on Friday backed off their proposal to give heightened protection to an endangered plant's habitat near Barstow where the Army wants to expand its tank-training center.

Environmental groups said the decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to wipe out almost 30,000 acres of critical habitat is a death sentence for the Lane Mountain milk-vetch, a perennial herb that is clinging to existence in the western Mojave Desert.

The wildlife agency cited the importance of military training at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin in dropping the year-old proposal. Such designations can restrict activities to protect the land where an imperiled species is struggling to survive.

Army officials hope to begin training in an expansion of the National Training Center at Fort Irwin in Barstow by 2006. The area is needed, the Army says, to better prepare troops for Iraq.

"It was excluded for national security reasons, which there is a provision in the Endangered Species Act that allows for that," said Lois Grunwald, a spokeswoman for the federal wildlife agency

in Ventura.

Some of the 29,522 acres is outside the expansion area but also was dropped, Grunwald said, because the Lane Mountain milk-vetch will be protected under a habitat conservation plan in western Mojave desert overseen by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Such habitat proposals often are reduced in size but rarely to zero, said environmental groups, which blamed it on a politically driven decision by the Bush administration that ignores biological sense.

"This is a new anti-environmental low," said Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. A judge in 2002 agreed with the Center and the California Native Plant Society and ordered critical habitat designations for the milk-vetch and seven other Southern California plants.

The new decision could force the issue back in court, Patterson said.

Army officials are hoping to begin training in the expansion area in late 2006. The 131,000-acre expansion of the 643,000-acre Fort Irwin has been thwarted for several years because of concern for the desert tortoise, a threatened species, and more recently the milk-vetch, both of which live in the land tagged for expansion.

But the land is needed, Army officials said, to better prepare brigades of 5,000 troops for the large amount of territory they will face in Iraq.

"It's hard to replicate that other than at the National Training Center and that's why that additional space is so critical," said Maj. John Clearwater, an Army spokesman.

The Army still plans to fence the areas where the plant lives and take other steps to protect the tortoise, said Nicole Lileikis, an Army contractor working on the expansion effort.

"They'll definitely fence off the populations ... to keep anyone off it," she said.