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Agency's decision on water faulted

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An environmental group is challenging a decision by a San Bernardino County land-use agency that could lead to the dissolution of a water-conservation district.

The Center for Biological Diversity, which has an office in Joshua Tree, filed a lawsuit Wednesday in San Bernardino County Superior Court seeking to block a March 15 decision by the county Local Agency Formation Commission.

The agency voted to designate a zero sphere of influence for the San Bernardino Valley Water Conservation District, an action that is considered a precursor to eliminating the district, which is responsible for recharging the aquifers that supply groundwater to much of the region.

LAFCO officials made the decision after two years of study. They recommended that the conservation district be taken over by the San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District.

Adam Keats, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the decision could harm rare plants and

animals that rely on water flows in the Santa Ana River watershed.

Keats contended that the municipal district will not have the same commitment to conserving water and protecting the environment, opening the tap to more development instead.

He described the vote as a power and water grab by the water agencies and cities, such as Redlands, that support the merger.

"They're looking at getting rid of an agency that doesn't agree with them on everything and replacing it with an agency they have in their back pocket," Keats said.

The legal complaint accuses LAFCO of violating the California Environmental Quality Act in not studying the environmental effects of the proposal.

Kathleen Rollings-McDonald, the agency's executive officer, said its environmental consultant found that the proposal was exempt because it resulted in no physical changes.

The designation by LAFCO is a planning tool and recommendation, she said. A consolidation effort would be subject to a separate application,

Rollings-McDonald said.

Dave Cosgrove, general counsel for the conservation district, said the district is not involved in the legal action, although it had been contacted by the Center for Biological Diversity. However, he said the agency agrees with the criticisms raised by the group.

"Certainly, we had an objection to the way LAFCO proceeded," Cosgrove said.

Bob Reiter, general manager of the Municipal Water District, did not return a call seeking comment