

Critical habitat designated for Mexican spotted owl

By Greg Jones
Staff Writer

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) designated four million acres of federal land in Arizona -- one million acres in Graham and Greenlee counties -- as critical habitat for the threatened Mexican spotted owl.

In Greenlee County, 862,344 acres have been designated in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest. In Graham County, 188,888 acres of the Coronado National Forest were designated as lands that contain the physical and biological features essential for the survival of the owl and are therefore considered critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

Added to the threatened species list in 1993 because of habitat loss, the owl lives in geographically fragmented areas with forested mountains and canyons.

The designation is in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD).

In a press release, the USFWS says recovery of the owl will come through voluntary actions, not regulatory measures.

"In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits," the release states.

Elizabeth Slown, a USFWS spokesperson for the southwest region, said an assistant secretary with the service once compared designating critical habitat to

eating chicken wings: "A lot of effort for not much meat."

Slown said the designation will add another layer of protection -- listing the owl as threatened provides some protection for its habitat -- but it is "not the magic bullet."

Kierstin Suckling, policy director for the Tucson-based CBD, said the statement that critical habitat designation does not benefit threatened or endangered species is not true.

"They track their species, and they know which are improving and declining, which have critical habitat and which ones don't," he said. "The agency has shown that species with critical habitat designations are recovering twice as fast.

"It's frustrating to see them spew these rhetorical statements with no evidence at all and ignore all the scientific data."

Suckling said the CBD is fairly happy with the designations in Arizona, but believes large tracts of land in Utah and New Mexico were left out with no good reason.

Slown said the decision to leave out more than 100,000 acres -- mostly places where the forest borders urban areas -- from the designated areas was necessary for maintaining a healthy forest and preventing wildfires.

"One of the worst possible things for the spotted owl is catastrophic wildfires," she said. "In order to have a healthy forest, you have to do thinning."

Anne Casey, district biologist with the U.S. Forest Service Safford Ranger District said the designation will probably not have a large impact on Mount Graham.

She said the owls are actively monitored and are taken into consideration any time activity is planned on the mountain.

Graham County Supervisor Mark Herrington is not happy with the designation. He said genetic work has shown the California spotted owl is identical genetically to the Mexican spotted owl.

"Why do we tie up all of this ground and make all these restrictions on our land use around here when there are plenty of owls that exist?" he asked.

Herrington is also concerned that too much land is being designated without the benefit of an economic impact study. The first proposed designation of 13 million acres of critical habitat was successfully challenged in court by counties in Arizona and New Mexico. Herrington predicted another lawsuit will be filed.

"Considering the new information that has come forward, how much they're asking for and the fact that they won't do the economic analysis, they'll be looking at another lawsuit," he said. "They keep saying they don't have the money to do these things. Well, it might save some money if they do it right the first time."

Suckling said the CBD might also file a lawsuit asking for more areas to be included in the designation.

"There's a very good chance we'll end up hauling the agency back into court," he said.

Critical habitat designation does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.