

The Sacramento Bee

Agency hails beetle comeback

Developers cheer plan to lift endangered status; some scientists skeptical.

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Federal wildlife officials said Monday they plan to remove the valley elderberry longhorn beetle from the endangered species list.

A five-year review showed its fortunes have improved.

The dime-sized beetle, unique to the Central Valley, has been the bane of developers and flood-control officials since it was first listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1980.

Since it relies on a single host plant, the relatively hardy valley elderberry, hundreds of construction projects have been required to take extraordinary steps when encountering the shrub.

"Thank God. This is the happiest day of my career," said Joe Countryman, president of MBK Engineers, a Sacramento consulting firm that has repeatedly confronted the beetle issue. "It makes me want to cry to think of the amount of money that's been wasted on this thing."

The beetle's status was reported Monday as part of a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service review of 12 protected species in California. The beetle is the only one proposed for a complete delisting in its habitat.

Spokesman Al Donner said delisting is justified because the beetle now exists in 190 locations in the region, compared to 10 sites in 1980. Also since that time, about 50,000 acres of floodplain habitat have been protected to benefit the beetle.

"There was good reason at the time of listing to view the species as in peril," said Donner.

The proposal will not become final until after a federal rule-making process and public comment period. Donner could not say how long that will take.

In the meantime, rules protecting the beetle stay in place.

Jeff Miller, wildlands coordinator at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the claim of better fortunes for the beetle is not clear-cut. He said many of the newfound beetle populations are clustered, rather than dispersed throughout the beetle's range. Also, the population at each site is unknown, he added.

"They've found more sites, but that doesn't necessarily correlate to more population," said Miller. "For this species, I'm sure we would oppose delisting."

Marcel Holyoak, a University of California, Davis, professor of environmental science, said the university conducted the fact-gathering on the beetle under contract with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The decision to delist lies with the government, but Holyoak said "the best possible science" went into the status review.

That included reporting new threats, such as the invasive Argentine ant, which is becoming widespread and disruptive to beetle populations. Also, it appears the beetle's host plant stopped reproducing along much of the Sacramento River since Shasta Dam was built.

"I'm surprised by the decision (to delist)," said Holyoak. "But given that there is a lot of habitat, and the beetle

is widespread but not abundant within this habitat ... it doesn't seem like an unreasonable decision to me."

The beetle is important because it is an indicator for the health of riparian -- or river-adjacent -- habitat. More than 90 percent of that habitat has been lost since the mid-1800s. As the beetle's fortunes go, in short, so goes much of the valley's habitat.

"This has been kind of a flagship species that has resulted in protection and restoration efforts for riparian forests in California," said Ronald Stork, a senior policy advocate at Friends of the River. "Without that focus I'm concerned we may erase the gains we've made in recent years."

Because elderberry bush is vital to the beetle, its presence has been costly for construction projects near river corridors, especially flood-control projects. Countryman recalled a project near the Feather River that disturbed a single elderberry bush, requiring five acres of replacement habitat at a cost of \$50,000.

To improve the Mayhew levee on the American River next year, the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency must relocate 140 elderberry shrubs and plant 15 acres of new elderberries, said Executive Director Stein Buer.

Delisting might make some projects easier, he said, but his agency will always strive to improve riparian habitat regardless.

"What we hope the outcome will be if there is a delisting is that it will allow us to collaborate on species recovery without having to jump through so many hoops," Buer said. "We'll get to the same goal more quickly."