

Government says salamanders don't need listing

By PAUL FATTIG
Mail Tribune

Two salamander species found only in the Siskiyou Mountains don't warrant additional protection under federal law, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The agency announced Tuesday it found that the Siskiyou Mountain salamander, whose habitat includes the mountains in Jackson, Josephine and Siskiyou California counties, and the Scott Bar salamander, found only in Siskiyou County, are not threatened as environmentalists have claimed. The Scott River is in the Klamath River drainage west of Yreka.

The decision was in response to a petition by environmental groups, including the Ashland-based Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center, requesting the Siskiyou Mountain salamander and related populations be listed under the federal Endangered

Species Act. The act requires the agency to review a petition to determine whether it contains any new substantial scientific information.

The environmental groups, who said Tuesday they would see Uncle Sam in federal court, listed threats to the species that included loss of habitat quality from logging, global warming and lack of adequate protection since the survey and manage program of the 1994 Northwest Forest Plan was discontinued in 2004.

However, the agency determined that logging has declined dramatically and does not pose significant threat to the species, spokeswoman Alexandra Pitts said from the service's Sacramento office. Salamanders have been found living in areas that already have been clear-cut and in other naturally open habitats, she said.

The Siskiyou Mountain salamander is already protected as

a threatened species under the California Endangered Species Act, Pitts said. In addition, the Northwest Forest Plan provisions protecting the salamanders were reinstated early this year, she said.

The salamanders are terrestrial, medium-sized, slender-bodied amphibians with short limbs and a dorsal stripe. Both are found exclusively within rock or talus outcrops in forest habitats where moisture and humidity are high enough to allow them to breathe through their skin, a process known as dermal respiration.

Scott Bar and Siskiyou Mountain salamanders were believed to be the same species until last year when, after years of checking genetics and morphology, scientists determined they were separate species. Scientists have dubbed the Scott Bar salamander *Plethodon asupak* while the Siskiyou Mountain salamander is *Plethodon stormi*.

Some 200 sites containing Siskiyou salamanders have been found, while about 27 have been located containing the Scott Bar species, Pitts said.

George Sexton, conservation director for the wildlands center, said the agency was making a political decision, not one based on science. “The Fish and Wildlife Service under the Bush administration has thrown science to the wind,” he said. “I think this was a political move. Because of that, we’re confident we will win in court.”

The salamanders are important because they are an indicator species, he said.

“They fit very neatly in the web of life,” he said, noting they feed on insects. “They aren’t at the top of the food chain or the bottom. But if you take out a link in the chain it’s not good any more.”

He also adamantly disagrees the species can survive in talus outside an old-growth forest habitat.

“This is the administration’s back-door way of gutting the Endangered Species Act,” he said.

“The Siskiyou and newly discovered Scott Bar salamanders need the safety net of the Endangered Species Act to survive,” added Noah Greenwald, a conservation biologist in Portland with the Center for Biological Diversity and primary author of the petition. “Today’s decision flies in

the face of science and comes from an administration that has persistently showed disregard for the nation’s wildlife.”

Environmental activists say the U.S. Forest Service is preparing an environmental impact statement to eliminate the survey and manage program, and that the state of California is considering delisting the Siskiyou Mountain salamander.

Other groups petitioning the agency included the Environmental Protection Information Center in Garberville, Calif., and the Cascadia Wildlands Project in Eugene.

For additional information on the agency’s decision concerning the Siskiyou Mountain and Scott Bar salamanders, check out www.fws.gov/yreka/