
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

MARCH 6, 2008

Too little done to protect endangered species, lawsuit says

FORESTS: Environmental groups target federal agencies over policies covering Inland land.

By JENNIFER BOWLES

The Press-Enterprise

Environmental groups on Wednesday filed a lawsuit against three federal agencies, alleging they have failed to protect dozens of endangered species that live in Southern California's four national forests from harmful impacts of off-roading, livestock grazing, roads and power lines.

The legal action comes on the heels of a lawsuit California officials filed Feb. 28 against the U.S. Forest Service because the management plans for the San Bernardino, Cleveland, Angeles and Los Padres national forests permit road construction and oil drilling that have been long opposed by the state.

The most recent lawsuit specifically targets so-called biological opinions issued in 2005 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Fisheries Service that assessed impacts on endangered species from those same forest management plans.

The third target of Wednesday's lawsuit is the U.S. Forest Service.

The environmental groups allege those opinions failed to consider ways to prevent harm to species by activities on forest lands, and failed to require any method for tracking how many plants and animals are killed because of those activities.

Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the federal wildlife agency, said she hadn't seen the lawsuit and couldn't comment. A phone call to forest officials wasn't immediately returned Wednesday afternoon.

The four national forests are among the last refuges for the 76 species considered endangered or threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, the environmental groups said.

In the Inland forests they include the arroyo toad, mountain yellow-legged frog, Quino checkerspot butterfly, and two birds known as the southwestern willow flycatcher and the least Bell's vireo.

"These forests are so important because they are some of the last natural areas in Southern California amid an ever-expanding sea of urban development. Many of these plants and animals have nowhere else to

go," said David Hogan, conservation manager at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Center filed the lawsuit in U.S. District Court in San Francisco, along with Defenders of Wildlife, the Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society and Los Padres Forest Watch.

The number of roads in the forests, Hogan said, is one of the biggest concerns. Roads cause erosion that damages streams and streamside forest where the arroyo toad and the least Bell's vireo live and breed.

"Erosion is not just a problem for wildlife, it's a problem for people when that erosion pollutes downstream water supplies," he said.