

**Agency plans to cut area of k-rat**

Endangered species might lose habitat

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Article Launched: 05/18/2008 09:45:19 PM PDT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing cutting the habitat set aside for the endangered San Bernardino kangaroo rat by two-thirds.

Under the proposal, the designated critical habitat for the kangaroo rat would be reduced to approximately 10,500 acres from more than 33,000 acres in San Bernardino and Riverside counties, according to a report by the federal agency.

The species historically occupied 326,467 acres, an area about one third the size of Rhode Island.

"What we're seeing is this decline in critical habitat, and it doesn't bode well for the recovery of the species," said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The concern is that the reduction in the designated land will make it easier for more places to be developed, Anderson said.

That view, however, is not held by the agency proposing the reduction.

"It's a mischaracterization to say it's a loss," said Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the Carlsbad office of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The kangaroo rat's endangered species listing requires developers to consult with U.S. Fish and Wildlife even if a project is not on land that is labeled "critical habitat," she said.

The critical habitat reduction was suggested because new mapping technology has allowed scientists to pinpoint where the kangaroo rat is found and what areas are crucial to species conservation, Hendron said.

The sandy-colored rodent makes its home in floodplains, burrowing along many of the creeks and rivers that run through San Bernardino County. Unlike most kangaroo rats, it has four toes, not five, on its hind feet.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was required to revise its critical habitat designation for the kangaroo rat as part of a settlement from a 2005 lawsuit filed by the Pacific Legal Foundation, a group that advocates for the rights of property owners.

The settlement requires that the federal agency complete its proposal by June 2008, but a request for an extension was recently submitted, Hendron said.

One of the areas excluded from the new plan is the 763-acre North Etiwanda Preserve, which stretches east from Rancho Cucamonga to Fontana in the San Gabriel foothills.

Hendron said the preserve did meet the standard for critical habitat designation.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is working on a management plan for the kangaroo rat and other endangered species in anticipation of a change in water flow behind the Seven Oaks Dam, east of Highland.

Anderson is worried that changes in the Army Corps and U.S. Fish and Wildlife management plans could have irrevocable results.

"We're afraid that they've reached the critical level where any further decrease will send them over the edge to extinction," Anderson said.