



Lynx critical habitat increases

By SUSAN GALLAGHER
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER
February 24, 2009

HELENA, Mont. -- The amount of land designated as critical habitat for the Canada lynx, a cat federally classified as a threatened species, will increase more than 20-fold under a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision announced Tuesday.

The designation will apply to about 39,000 square miles in six states, up from a total of 1,841 square miles in three, the agency said. Lands in Maine, Idaho and Wyoming are being added to the critical-habitat map that was adopted in 2006 and consisted only of some national parklands in Minnesota, Montana and Washington. The amount of land designated in those states will expand.

The habitat reconsideration, influenced by a court ruling, followed allegations that Deputy Assistant Interior Secretary Julie MacDonald interfered with some decisions by the Fish and Wildlife Service. MacDonald resigned in 2007 after the Interior Department's inspector general concluded she pressured federal scientists to alter findings on certain matters before the agency.

"This (lynx habitat) was one that we decided she may have inappropriately influenced," Shawn Sartorius, the Fish and Wildlife Service's lead lynx biologist, said Tuesday from his Helena office.

Sartorius, who said he knows of no terrestrial critical-habitat designation larger than the 39,000-square-mile plan, added that not all the same people were involved in the lynx decisions of 2006 and Tuesday. That two such widely different outcomes were reached may not be attributable entirely to MacDonald's involvement or lack of it, he said.

Critical habitat identifies places with features essential for conservation of threatened or endangered species. For lynx, it includes forests with features such as woody debris for denning; habitat for the snowshoe hare, on which lynx prey; and extended periods of deep, fluffy snow, through which lynx move with relative ease.

The critical-habitat designation applies to about 10,000 square miles in northwestern Montana and a small portion of northeastern Idaho, and about 9,500 square miles in Yellowstone National Park and surrounding areas in Montana and Wyoming. The designated lands in Maine total about 9,500 square miles, followed by Minnesota with about 8,000 and Washington with roughly 1,800. Some of the land is public and some private.

Plum Creek Timber Co., the nation's largest owner of private land, finds the Fish and Wildlife Service decision disappointing but "will work with the agency as it implements the critical-habitat designation and as it determines how the designation will be applied to private land," said Kathy Budinick, spokeswoman for the Seattle-based company.

"It's too early to tell what the implications to our business will be, but we have dealt with Endangered Species Act issues for years and this is one of our areas of expertise," Budinick said. "So we will deal with related implications for our operations as they arise."

She added that Plum Creek and others had offered Fish and Wildlife an alternative plan they thought would provide greater benefit for lynx and "more long-term business certainty" for landowners.

Sartorius said he sees few ramifications for owners of private land.

"We don't think that what they think might happen is likely to happen," he said.

He also noted that management practices of the U.S. Forest Service already take into account the needs of lynx, and the habitat designation is unlikely to impose new requirements on that agency.

The Center for Biological Diversity in Portland, Ore., finds the habitat expansion "a dramatic improvement from the Bush administration to the Obama administration" and is "overall quite pleased," program director Noah Greenwald said. But it is regrettable that some areas such as the Southern Rockies were not included, Greenwald said.

Sartorius said parts of the Southern Rockies have good lynx habitat, but only in relatively small patches. The area did not qualify as "the best of the best" when the Fish and Wildlife Service evaluated habitat, he said.