

July 30, 2007

Proposed rule would shrink plant's habitat

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The Press-Enterprise

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service issued a proposed rule Friday that would shrink by 25 percent the boundaries of critical habitat set aside for survival of a plant threatened with extinction in an area popular with off-road enthusiasts in Imperial County.

The new proposed protection for Peirson's milk-vetch , a legume with a deep tap root to anchor it in shifting sands, stems from a lawsuit filed against the service by environmental groups challenging studies done in 2004 on a proposed 21,836-acre critical habitat area that includes the 300-foot Glamis sand dunes.

Public hearings on the proposed rule and a related draft economic analysis are scheduled from 1 to 3 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. Aug. 23 at the service's Carlsbad office.

The service proposes a 16,108-acre protected area in the Algodones Dunes, an area managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management as part of the Imperial San Dunes Recreation Area, the service said in a news release.

"This reduction of protected habitat will make it difficult, if not impossible for the Peirson's milk-vetch to survive and recover," IleeneAnderson , a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a news release.

The center was one of the groups that sued the government in federal court.

The service on its Web site contends that BLM 2005 survey data provides "more specific and reliable information" about the plant's population range than the "limited data" used for the earlier habitat proposal.

For more information on the Web: www.fws.gov/carlsbad/PMV_Docs.htm

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