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New effort underway to protect spotted owl

PETITION: Environmental groups make another bid to get the bird designated an endangered species

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The Press-Enterprise

An owl that lives in old-growth forests in Inland mountains and the Sierra Nevadas is facing increasing threats that could lead to its demise, environmental groups alleged.

The groups, including the Center for Biological Diversity in Idyllwild, on Wednesday filed a second petition with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, seeking protection for the California spotted owl on the federal endangered species list.

The petition is in addition to a lawsuit filed earlier this year against the agency after it rejected the first petition.

The California spotted owl should be designated an endangered species, environmentalists say.

The wildlife service last year denied the petition because biologists found 2,200 sites statewide that were occupied by one or more owls, said Al Donner, an agency spokesman.

"We made a determination that it doesn't warrant protection," he said.

However, he said, the agency will review the latest petition and make a new finding.

The environmental groups said the agency made its decision on the first petition based on expected protections in the Sierras that never came to fruition.

In addition, they say, the owl is facing more threats in Inland forests, including the removal of beetle-ravaged pine trees in the drought-weakened San Bernardino National Forest.

The brown owls, which grow to about 19 inches tall and have white spots on their head, back and under-parts, use the old and tall trees to nest, breed and spot their prey.

They eat wood rats and flying squirrels.

"We know the owl needs those trees to survive," said Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Local forest officials didn't immediately return calls seeking comment.

But proposed management plans by the U.S. Forest Service for all four Southern California forests note that populations of the owl are declining, saying the most likely cause is the drought, tree mortality and last year's devastating wildfires.

"Alteration and loss of habitat due to tree mortality and dead tree removal will continue for many years, as will the increased risk of catastrophic fire created by high levels of tree and shrub die-off," the plan said.

"Small (owl) populations in isolated mountain ranges could decrease or even be lost because of these factors."

Greenwald said environmental groups support removing the dead and tinder-dry

trees to protect communities from fire.

"But," he said, "we want to make sure that prescribed burning is the primary tool and to the extent that there is thinning that it occurs on small trees."