

THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

JUNE 8, 2005

No increased protection for endangered onion

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service leaves further safeguards up to Riverside County

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The Press-Enterprise

Federal wildlife officials on Tuesday declined to heighten safeguards for land considered crucial to the survival of an endangered plant that grows only in western Riverside County, leaving protection for the Munz's onion mostly in county hands.

The so-called habitat designation by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service only includes a small patch of the Cleveland National Forest where the plant grows, leaving out more than 1,000 acres of the plant's habitat in fast-growing western Riverside County.

However, agency officials said they are confident the majority of the known populations of the plant, fewer than 19, will be protected under the county's plan to preserve 146 rare plants and animals while allowing growth to occur elsewhere with fewer environmental restrictions.

"A good number of the plants are already protected," said Ron Rempel, general manager of the Western Riverside County Regional Conservation Authority.

The county undertook the plan in part to prevent such designations, which can give federal wildlife officials the power to require modifications to most large

developments in order to protect the habitat.

Environmentalists who sued the federal agency to get the designation said it fell short of protecting the plant. They said the designations help to guide land-use decisions and are key to preventing an endangered species from becoming extinct.

The Munz's onion "is part of the fabric of nature in Riverside County, and who are we to tear this apart," said David Hogan, with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the federal wildlife agency, disagreed.

"Even absent a critical habitat designation," she said, "it's not as though the species or habitat itself is just left unattended or unprotected."

A member of the lily family, the Munz's onion grows to about 12 inches and sprouts pink and white flowers in the spring.

The plant grows along a 40-mile band of clay soil from the Gavilan Hills to west of Temescal Canyon and Lake Elsinore, and to the foothills of the San Jacinto Mountains near Lake Skinner and Vail Lake.

Some 176 acres of the Cleveland National Forest have already been fenced off to prevent motorists from driving off a road that leads to Elsinore Peak and into a meadow where the plant grows, said Mary Thomas, a Forest Service biologist.