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Pygmy owl may lose endangered label

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The federal government plans to remove the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl from the endangered species list next month, but one local conservation group has vowed to fight the move.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced yesterday it will remove Endangered Species Act protections for the tiny raptor and rescind critical habitat designations for more than 1.2 million acres in Arizona for the owl because the agency determined it is not a distinct subspecies. The decision is expected to go into effect May 15.

Daniel R. Patterson, desert ecologist at the Center for Biological Diversity, plans to fight the decision.

"We might end up having to take it right into the courts," he said.

He criticized the ruling, calling it a political decision that ignores years of research.

"It's anti-science, it's anti-conservation and it's anti-public interest,"

Patterson said.

In a prepared statement, Southern Arizona Home Builders Association president Ed Taczanowsky said the decision puts the issue to rest.

"Now that the federal government has made its final ruling, we consider this issue to be over and will direct our attention to other development policy issues in southern Arizona," he said.

County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said the decision will have little effect in Pima County because the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan protects sensitive habitats based on criteria for multiple species - not just the pygmy owl - and those criteria don't rely on federal endangered or threatened species listings.

"Nothing is changed at all from our perspective," he said. "It's not a federal plan, it's a local plan. It has been decided by local officials."

Alan Lurie, former executive vice president of SAHBA, was a driving force behind a Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling that led to the reconsideration of the endangered designation for the owl.

Lurie agreed that delisting the owl will have little effect here.

