

Owl's status challenged

2 groups want pygmy back on endangered-species list

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Two environmental groups have asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to return a tiny desert owl to the endangered-species list.

The cactus ferruginous pygmy owl was removed from the list in May. Twenty or fewer of the birds are known to live in Arizona.

Last year, Benjamin Tuggle, acting regional director of the service's Southwest Region, said the Arizona birds are not a significant portion of the entire population, which also lives in Texas and northern Mexico.

The Tucson-based **Center for Biological Diversity** originally petitioned for protection for the owl in 1992. It was listed as endangered in 1997. The National Association of Home Builders and the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association challenged the listing in 2001.

The court ordered the Fish and Wildlife Service to show that Arizona pygmy owls were of sufficient biological and ecological significance to the entire species to qualify for listing as a distinct population segment. Service officials said they were unable to do so, largely because sufficient numbers of the owls are believed to live in Mexico.

The petition requesting that the bird be placed back on the list is the next step in the dispute.

"The pygmy owl should never have been removed from the endangered species list," said **Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity** and primary author of the petition. "The pygmy owl is near extinction in Arizona and sharply declining in northern Sonora. It desperately needs the protection of the Endangered Species Act to survive."

Jenny Neeley, southwest representative of Defenders of Wildlife, the other environmental group involved, said the removal of the bird from the list was an overreaction.

The petition says the Fish and Wildlife Service ignored scientific evidence provided by its own biologists. The agency also refused to consider the fact that the quickly disappearing Arizona population constitutes the last U.S. population of the western subspecies of the owl, conservationists argue.

Greenwald said the pygmy owl population in Arizona has declined from 41 birds in 1999 to fewer than 30 birds in recent years. Urban development has contributed to the near-extirpation of pygmy owls in northwest Tucson, he said. Likewise, in northern Sonora, surveys demonstrate that pygmy owls have declined by 26 percent since 2000.