

Feds asked to classify pygmy owl endangered in Ariz., Mexico

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TUCSON - Environmentalists are now asking the U.S. government to classify the pygmy owl as endangered in Arizona and northern Mexico.

Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity both filed their petition Thursday with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Although legally the United States cannot protect species living in another country from harm there, it can stop importation of endangered species from other countries.

The two environmental groups are trying to get around a common argument made by critics that it made no sense to protect cactus ferruginous pygmy owls living in Southern Arizona when the species is far more abundant in Mexico.

The environmentalists say the bird deserves binational protection because a study by two University of Arizona researchers showed its numbers are dropping in northern Sonora.

"The pygmy owl is threatened both in Sonora and Arizona and protection should never have been removed," said Noel Greenwald, a conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity.

He said lots of desert in Mexico being converted to non-native grasses for livestock and that represents "a pretty grim picture for the pygmy owl."

Fish and Wildlife, which took the bird off the endangered species list, and an attorney for the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association, which sued to remove it from the list, said they can't comment on the petition until they've had time to read it. The wildlife service legally has 90 days to respond to the petition.

Last week, U.S. District Judge Susan Bolton of Phoenix dismissed a lawsuit filed by the two environmental groups challenging the wildlife service's April 2006 decision to delist the pygmy owl.

Since 1996, authorities have found anywhere from a dozen to 41 adult pygmy owls a year in Southern Arizona. Last year, surveyors spotted 28 owls.

Bolton concluded that contrary to environmentalists' claims, the service had not disregarded and ignored scientific researchers and its own staff scientists in deciding to remove the owl from the list.

The judge sided with the service that the loss of Arizona owls would not significantly reduce the range of the entire species, which also lives in South Texas and eastern and western Mexico.