

U.S. Fish and Wildlife to begin review of tiny owl's status

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TUCSON - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decided to conduct a yearlong status review of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl in a move that could restore it to threatened or endangered species protection, the agency said Friday.

The action comes in response to a petition from Defenders of Wildlife, the Center for Biological Diversity and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility.

The groups contended that new information was not available or within the scope of analysis when Fish and Wildlife delisted the Arizona population of pygmy owls in 2006 after first listing them in 1997.

"Recently published genetic and taxonomic information, together with updated [data](#) on the threats to the pygmy owl and its habitat, are substantial," said Benjamin Tuggle, the wildlife service's southwest director.

"Our initial examination of the information in the petition has prompted us to initiate an assessment of the entire subspecies."

Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the owl is near extinction in Arizona and is declining sharply in northern Mexico. "It desperately needs the protection of the Endangered Species Act to survive," he said.

He said the owl, which has dwindled from 41 birds in 1999 to fewer than 30 in recent years, never should have been removed from the endangered list.

The federal agency could determine to list the bird as endangered or threatened, find that listing is not warranted or that it is warranted but precluded by other candidate species at greater risk.

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Environmental groups contend that information about the pygmy owl's decline was not available or within the scope of analysis when Fish and Wildlife delisted the Arizona population of pygmy owls in 2006 after first listing them in 1997.