

Center to sue to put pygmy owl back on endangered list

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The Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity and two other environmental groups intend to sue the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to get a southern Arizona owl species put back on the endangered species list.

The Center, Defenders of Wildlife and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility, hope to force relisting of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl, which was removed from the list in 2006, they said in a news release.

The owl was listed as endangered in 1997 then removed after federal officials deemed the Arizona population not significant to the species, which mainly exists in northern Mexico.

The environmental groups contend that the owl is at higher risk now than when it was removed from the list, and the Arizona population is important, said Noah Greenwald, a Center biologist and the main author of the relisting petition.

"I definitely think we have a chance," Greenwald said.

In the final listing ruling, published in the Federal Register on March 10, 1997, Fish & Wildlife named four distinct subspecies of the pygmy owl - in Texas, Arizona and eastern and western Mexico. All four subspecies were deemed significant in that ruling.

The decision to delist the owl nine years later was contrary to the information provided by Fish & Wildlife's own biologists, Greenwald said.

"The Bush administration simply ignored the science," Greenwald said Tuesday.

The pygmy owl rose to southern Arizona public attention in 1998, when the center sued to block construction of a high school in Amphitheater Public Schools district because the proposed site was in owl habitat. The school was eventually built.

The Fish & Wildlife endangered species spokeswoman was not immediately available for comment Tuesday.

The legal battle to list the owl will take time, Greenwald said.

"A final decision on the listing is probably two years away," he said.