http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2008/01/18/news/californian/20_08_551_17_08.txt

Feds may slash butterfly habitat in half

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer
Environmentalists call federal proposal 'recipe for extinction' for endangered Quino checkerspot butterfly

Federal wildlife officials Thursday proposed slashing by almost half the amount of land they designated earlier as "critical habitat" for the Quino checkerspot butterfly, one of Southern California's most endangered animals.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed reducing the amount of land targeted for special treatment under the Endangered Species Act from 172,000 acres to 98,000 acres. Officials said the revision was necessary to focus on saving those areas where significant butterfly populations still exist.

As in the past, the agency's strategy for saving the insect focuses solely on Southwest Riverside County and the Otay Mountain area of southern San Diego County ---- the only known places where the butterfly still lives.

However, in both counties acreages have been shaved substantially. And the wildlife agency said it is considering trimming it more by eliminating 37,000 acres in Riverside County because that acreage already is covered by a multibillion-dollar regional habitat conservation plan that aims to protect the Quino.

The black-and-orange-checkered insect once numbered in the millions and was considered one of Southern California's most plentiful butterflies. But in the wake of massive urban development, the Quino has disappeared entirely from the heavily urbanized counties of Orange, Los Angeles and San Bernardino, and coastal areas of San Diego County. And it now numbers in the hundreds.

One environmental group, the Center for Biological Diversity, protested the proposed downsizing.

"This outrageous proposal is a recipe for extinction of the Quino checkerspot butterfly," said Jeff Miller, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. "Checkerspot habitat is getting hammered by urban sprawl, many populations were burned in the recent wildfires and checkerspots are disappearing from major parts of their range because of global warming. The species needs more protected habitat, not less."

Miller also said it is inappropriate for the federal government to consider eliminating the Riverside County habitat ---- concentrated along Warm Springs Creek in Murrieta, around Lakes Skinner and Vail, and near Anza ---- because of the presence of the ambitious regional conservation plan that seeks to save 146 species.

Miller suggested such plans "serve as a blank check for habitat destruction for developers."

Dan Silver, executive director for the Endangered Habitats League in Los Angeles, said, however, that such plans can help protect wildlife. And Silver said it was expected ---- when he, builders, property owners and others gathered several years ago to draw up the plan ---- that successfully completing the plan would be grounds for lifting critical habitat.

Still, Silver said such a move could present a problem.

He said it could create a risk for the Quino because there is no guarantee the highly touted, but poorly funded, 153,000-acre western Riverside County conservation plan will be carried out. Silver said it would be better to have a critical habitat designation to fall back on in case parts of the plan aren't implemented.

Bruce Colbert, executive director for the Property Owners Association of Riverside County, countered that the region's leaders should be able to count on the plan because it was strictly scrutinized by federal and state agencies before it was adopted in 2004.

Colbert said the bottom line is Riverside County already is providing protection for the butterfly.

"And if critical habitat were listed on top of that, that would be double jeopardy," he said.

When properties are declared to be critical habitat, owners are often restricted in how they can develop their land. If federal permits are required for their developments, that triggers consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether projects will harm animals and to map out strategies for avoiding harm.