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Riverside land-use changes prompt suit

RIVERSIDE COUNTY: The amendment violates state law and could threaten wildlife, a group claims.

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The Press-Enterprise

An environmental group is suing Riverside County for amending its land-use plan, saying the changes violate state environmental law and could jeopardize wildlife.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed the civil lawsuit Thursday in Riverside County Superior Court.

The group said the changes affect approximately 10,000 acres around the county, and that the county didn't clearly spell out where the affected regions were.

"It's a clear end-run around the environmental laws, and it's not a proper way to go about it," said Adam Keats, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The county's general plan details where new homes and commercial buildings can be located. Earlier this month, county supervisors adopted an amendment to the plan changing the land use designations of more than 640 parcels scattered around the county.

In most cases, the designations would change from open space and conservation uses to residential or commercial development, according to the Center.

County spokesman Ray Smith said county officials have not been able to review the lawsuit yet.

The county advertised the plan to make the changes by saying they were required to "correct errors." Keats said the changes were much broader in scope than the notice implied.

Property owners requested some of the changes, but in other cases they did not, according to the lawsuit.

Keats said staff from the Center had trouble determining exactly which parts of the county would be affected by the changes using the parcel numbers and mapping coordinates the county supplied.

The Center is asking the court to rule the amendment violates the state Environmental Quality Act. Keats said the county should not have made all the changes as part of one action, and should have performed a study of the environmental effects of the changes.

County officials determined last September that the changes they were considering could affect the environment but not significantly, according to the lawsuit.