

Habitat for endangered plants faces challenge

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The Center for Biological Diversity is contesting habitat designations by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for three endangered plant species native to the San Bernardino Mountains, arguing the designated space isn't sufficient for the plants' sustenance.

On Wednesday, the Fish and Wildlife Service announced it had designated 1,769 acres of land in the mountains, primarily in the Big Bear Valley, as critical habitat for three plants federally declared as endangered.

The plants are the Bear Valley sandwort, the ash-gray Indian paintbrush and the southern mountain buckwheat.

The three species are commonly referred to as pebble plains plants because they have grown acclimated to the unique, powdery and pebbly soil conditions here. They are exclusive to the San Bernardino Mountains.

The areas designated as critical habitat include parts of Big Bear Lake, Fawnskin, Holcomb Valley, Baldwin Lake and Sugarloaf.

Future costs of conservation are estimated at \$180 million over the next 20 years, according to a Fish and Wildlife Service news release.

Those costs are associated with vehicle use off of designated routes, invasion of non-native plants in the habitat areas, and dispersed recreation activities, according to the press release.

While the preserved land space represents a 17 percent increase from what was proposed in January, it still fails to provide enough habitat for the plants to recover enough to be removed from the endangered species list, said Ileene Anderson, a staff biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity's Los Angeles office.

For example, the Bear Valley sandwort will have designated only 23 percent of its 6,057 acres of habitat, while the ash-gray Indian paintbrush will have only 25 percent of its currently occupied 7,008 acres protected.

The southern mountain buckwheat will have only 15 percent of its currently occupied 6,066 acres protected, Anderson said.

In all, the three plant species now occupy about 7,000 acres in the mountains, about 3,000 acres less than what they used to occupy before development and other human elements decimated the habitat, Anderson said.

"For the most part, the plants got maybe 25 percent of their habitat recognized as critical habitat, and my concern is there was no scientific justification why the remaining 75 percent of occupied habitat wasn't designated," Anderson said, adding that she will likely send a letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service requesting that they explain the scientific basis for the habitat designations.

The goal, she said, is to have enough land protected to ensure the plants' recovery and expansion.

"That's our goal, to get them robust enough to where we don't have to worry about them anymore," Anderson said of the plant.

Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Carlsbad office, said the federal agency followed all necessary steps to ensure the proper protection of the plants. Everything passed muster, she said.

"They're based on sound science. We had a public comment period. We submitted our proposal to independent peer reviewers," Hendron said. "We stand behind these designations."

The Endangered Species Act, Hendron said, specifically states that "critical habitat shall not include the entire area that can be occupied by the species."

"Critical habitat is a subset of those areas, and they are the specific locations where those particular areas are essential to

the species, and if those areas are lost you won't be able to recover the species," Hendron said.

She said the Fish and Wildlife Service's final ruling on the habitat designations, which includes the scientific references from which the designations were based, is available on their Web site at www.fws.gov.

Hendron said the Center for Biological Diversity's grievance lacks a scientific foundation.

"They make an assertion these plants are going to go extinct...," Hendron said.

" We determined that the exclusion of some of these areas in fact would not lead to the extinction of the pebbles plains plants."

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