



**COURTESY PHOTO/U.S. FISH AND
WILDLIFE SERVICE**

**The Arizona-based Center for Biological
Diversity is suing the federal government to
reconsider the amount of habitat needed to
protect the southwestern willow flycatcher.**

Environmental group suing federal agency over SLV bird

The southwestern willow flycatcher was listed as an endangered species in 1995.

**By MATT HILDNER
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

ALAMOSA - An Arizona-based environmental group intends to sue the federal government over alleged mismanagement of endangered species, including a small bird that makes its home in the San Luis Valley.

At the end of last month, the Center for Biological Diversity filed notice stating the Department of Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have violated the listing and critical habitat provisions of the Endangered Species Act for 55 species.

The southwestern willow flycatcher, one of the species in the notice, makes its home alongside rivers in Colorado and six other southwestern states. It was listed as an endangered species in 1995.

The center claims that when the Fish and Wildlife Service issued its final ruling on critical habitat protection for the bird, Interior and White House officials ignored wildlife scientists and reduced the amount of territory necessary to protect the bird.

That 2005 ruling designated 737 miles of floodplain, or 120,000 acres, in five southwestern states as critical habitat for the bird. Critical habitat is designated by the Secretary of the Interior as habitat that is essential to the conservation of a species and may require special management considerations or protection.

The 2005 ruling excluded the San Luis Valley from any such designation.

The decision narrowed the habitat to be protected from a 2004 proposal that called for protecting 376,000 acres, including more than 68,000 acres in Colorado.

The 2004 proposal would have designated critical habitat along an 87-mile segment of the Rio Grande and another 29 miles along the Conejos River.

Kieran Suckling, the center's policy director, said he hoped a judge would have agency scientists reexamine the 2005 ruling.

He said he expected the center to file in federal court in either Arizona, California or New Mexico.

"We haven't made a decision yet, but it's reasonable that it would be filed in one of those three states rather than Colorado," he said.

The center's notice said many of the decisions that went against the best available scientific data were directly traceable to former Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Interior Julie MacDonald.

In June the southwestern regional office for the Fish and Wildlife Service reviewed MacDonald's role in decisions for the flycatcher.

The review found that MacDonald did play a role in reducing the bird's critical habitat but that the decision did not affect the recovery efforts for the bird.