

## Settlement reached in rare butterfly case

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—A settlement reached by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and environmentalists requires the agency to take the first step in determining whether a rare butterfly found only in southern New Mexico deserves protection under the Endangered Species Act.

WildEarth Guardians and the Center for Biological Diversity sued the federal government in January in federal court in Washington, D.C., to force the agency to make a decision on the Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly—which the federal government previously proposed as an endangered species.

The 2-inch butterfly exists only on about 2,000 acres in high-elevation meadows in the mountains near the Sacramento Mountain village of Cloudcroft. The groups contend the butterfly is being threatened by climate change, insecticides, development, off-roading and livestock grazing.

"There's a lot of stress that this butterfly faces despite the fact that it does occupy such a small corner of the earth," Nicole Rosmarino, wildlife program director for WildEarth Guardians, said Tuesday. "This butterfly is perched on the brink of extinction." Under the settlement, the Fish and Wildlife Service has until late November to review a petition filed by the groups that seeks listing of the subspecies as either endangered or threatened, said Elizabeth Slown, a spokeswoman for the agency's regional office in Albuquerque.

If the agency determines the petition is valid, it will have until August 2009 to study the butterfly and decide whether it should be protected.

Noah Greenwald, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the settlement means the butterfly will get another chance at federal protection. The Fish and Wildlife Service in September 2001 had proposed listing the butterfly as endangered, but he said the agency never finalized that decision and withdrew it in December 2004.

The agency said at the time that threats were diminishing and the butterfly didn't need endangered species protection. But the groups renewed their push last summer after the Forest Service and the village of Cloudcroft approved plans to spray a chemical over thousands of acres to combat an infestation of looper caterpillars.

"Even though the Forest Service and the village backed off and agreed to spray later, it just really highlighted to us that this species is clearly imperiled and does need protection," Greenwald said.

Slown said the fact that the butterfly has been through the review process before will help biologists as they consider the groups' most recent petition.

The Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly is one of many across the nation that are facing threats to their survival, said Scott Hoffman Black, executive director of the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation in Portland, Ore. In fact, the group has 54 butterflies ranging from Oregon to North Dakota that are on its "red list."

Black admitted that butterflies are small and often overlooked, but he said the role they play in the ecosystem is much bigger than their size.

"Many of them pollinate plants, and without our pollinators—including butterflies and bees—we're not going to have all of the fruits on the plants that feed all of the birds and the mammals. They're really the backbone of these ecosystems," he said.

Black said one key to ensuring the survival of imperiled butterflies is cooperation with land managers, including federal agencies, local governments and private landowners.