

Conservation groups demand protection for two rare salamanders

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By JEFF BARNARD / Associated Press

Conservation groups are suing the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service again over its decision not to consider endangered species protection for two rare salamanders that live in old growth forests in Northern California and southern Oregon .

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco on Thursday contends that the state and federal protections the service cited as part of its decision not to do an endangered species review of the Scott Bar salamander and Siskiyou Mountain salamander are both being dismantled.

"They relied on protections they knew were on the chopping block, even though they knew they were on the chopping block, which doesn't make any sense," said Noah Greenwald, a biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland , the lead plaintiff in the lawsuit.

Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Alex Pitts said from Sacramento , Calif. , that the agency does not comment on pending litigation.

As a result of an earlier lawsuit, the service decided last April that the Siskiyou salamander is already protected as a threatened species by the state of California , and both salamanders are protected by a Northwest Forest Plan provision that preserves habitat for rare species on national forests.

However, the California Department of Fish and Game has begun a process to take the Siskiyou salamander off the state endangered list, and taken the position that the Scott Bar salamander is not protected, the lawsuit said.

The U.S. Forest Service is taking steps to eliminate the "survey and manage" provisions of the Northwest Forest Plan, the lawsuit added.

The survey and manage provisions were reinstated by court order this year, but the Forest Service is taking steps to replace them again with other protocols to protect rare species, said spokesman Tom Knappenberger.

The lawsuit added that Fish and Wildlife has acknowledged there is extensive logging on private lands which make up as much as 18 percent of the forests where the salamanders live.

The two salamanders live under the surface in patches of loose rock where old growth forest keeps the air and ground cool and moist.

They were once considered the same species, but were recognized by scientists as separate in recent years. Siskiyou Mountain salamanders are found in some 200 sites along the Klamath River in Northern California and the upper reaches of the Applegate River in Oregon . The Scott Bar salamander is known to inhabit only 27 sites around Scott Bar on the Klamath River.

The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned in 2004 for Endangered Species Act protection for the two salamanders. The petition cited logging, global warming and inadequate federal protection. The center then sued to get the Fish and Wildlife Service to make a preliminary finding on listing them as threatened or endangered