

Agency to Consider Salamander Protection

By JEFF BARNARD

GRANTS PASS, Ore. -- Under court order, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed Thursday to take another look at protecting two rare salamanders that live in old-growth forests in Oregon and California.

The agency filed notice in the Federal Register that there was substantial scientific or commercial information to indicate the Siskiyou Mountains and Scott Bar salamanders should be listed as threatened or endangered species.

A decision will be made by the end of the year, Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Alex Pitts said from Sacramento, Calif.

If the salamanders are protected, logging is likely to be curtailed within the salamanders' habitat, which includes parts of the Klamath and Rogue River-Siskiyou national forests, said Noah Greenwald, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the conservation groups that is seeking protection for the salamanders.

The salamanders would be the 57th and 58th species listed as threatened or endangered under the Bush administration _ all but three of which came as a result of lawsuits, according to a list kept by the Center for Biological Diversity.

A total of 1,310 species of plants and animals are protected by the Endangered Species Act. Another 290 are candidates for protection.

"It's clear that the Bush administration is doing everything possible to prevent species from ever being protected under the Endangered Species Act in the first place," said Kieran Suckling, policy director for the center. "That's the most efficient way to stop conservation."

Conservation groups originally petitioned to protect the salamanders in June 2004. The Fish and Wildlife Service rejected it for lack of money.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center sued in August 2005, and in December 2005 the service agreed to reconsider.

In April 2006, it concluded there was not enough scientific or commercial information in the petition to make a finding.

In July 2006, conservationists sued again.

Last January, a federal judge ruled that Fish and Wildlife illegally rejected the petition to protect the salamanders and ordered the agency to consider it again. The judge called the decision arbitrary and capricious.

Both salamanders are about five inches long, colored black with speckles. They have no lungs, instead breathing through their skin. They live on rocky slopes under the canopy of old-growth trees in the Siskiyou Mountains and Klamath River basin in northern California and southern Oregon. Their habitat does not overlap. For both species habitat covers about 600 square miles.