

Butterfly loses bid for federal protection
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A rare butterfly that exists only at a popular sand dune east of Reno does not warrant listing as a threatened or endangered species, the government announced Wednesday.

The decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was criticized by environmentalists, who insist continuing loss of butterfly habitat to off-highway vehicle use puts the survival of the Sand Mountain blue butterfly at serious risk.

Organized recreationists called the decision proper and said an emerging strategy designed to protect the dune habitat of the butterfly should ensure its continued existence.

Since August, U.S. Fish and Wildlife experts have reviewed whether the butterfly should be listed as environmental groups requested in 2004. Among evidence considered was a first-of-its kind count of butterfly populations by University of Nevada, Reno researchers who found the insect flourishing in parts of Sand Mountain, where its host vegetation, Kearney buckwheat, still remains.

Last summer's count, combined with the Bureau of Land Management's conservation strategy that closed many off-road trails to vehicles, makes a listing of the butterfly under the Endangered Species Act unnecessary, said Bob Williams, Nevada field supervisor for U.S. Fish and Wildlife.

"New information has become available on the status of the Sand Mountain blue butterfly, and new conservation strategies are being implemented," Williams said.

Environmentalists said the decision is disappointing.

"We just feel the decision is not based on science," said Lisa Belenky, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. "The science clearly shows the species is declining rapidly. We feel the species is in very bad shape, and these measures won't be enough to preserve it."

Belenky said federal land managers have already allowed off-roaders to destroy more than half of the butterfly's habitat and that the conservation plan will likely be ignored by many people using Sand Mountain.

This week, more than three dozen scientists sent a letter protesting a Bush administration interpretation of the Endangered Species Act that would enable the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect animals and plants only where they are battling for survival.

