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# Tiny desert owl to be taken off endangered list

*The Associated Press*

TUCSON, Ariz. -- A tiny desert owl is set to be taken off the federal government's endangered species list, drawing praise from developers but protests from environmentalists.

The cactus ferruginous pygmy owl is only about 6 inches long and weighs in at less than 3 ounces, but has been at the center of a battle between environmentalists and developers for more than a decade.

Environmental groups successfully sued to have it placed on the endangered list in the early 1990s. Developers countersued in 2001, opposing restrictions placed on land use to protect the bird.

An appeals court ordered the government to reconsider the listing and the habitat designation.

The owl is set to be removed from the endangered species list next month, a move that also will rescind critical habitat designation for 1.2 million acres in Arizona.

The Fish and Wildlife Service determined the bird was not a distinct

subspecies and therefore not worthy of protection. The decision is expected to go into effect May 15.

The bird is native to the Sonoran desert and its population has dropped below 30 at last count.

The decision is likely to be fought by the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

"We might end up having to take it right into the courts," said Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist with the environmental group.

He said the move was a political decision that ignores years of research.

"It's anti-science, it's anti-conservation and it's anti-public interest," Patterson said.

The Southern Arizona Home Builders Association said the federal decision ends the fight.

"Now that the federal government has made its final ruling, we consider this issue to be over and will direct our attention to other development policy issues in southern Arizona," he said.

The decision won't mean much in Pima County because the county's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan protects sensitive habitats for all species, said County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry.

Some of the pygmy owl's prime habitat is in Pima County.



A cactus ferruginous pygmy owl is shown at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Ariz., in this Jan. 16, 1998, file photo. (AP / John Miller)