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ENDANGERED SPECIES: Obama admin weighs listing for S. Calif. butterflies

Allison Winter, E&E reporter

The Obama administration will consider Endangered Species Act protection for a Southern California butterfly that the George W. Bush administration had rejected from the protected list.

In a notice to be published in tomorrow's Federal Register, the Fish and Wildlife Service determined that substantial information exists to show that listing "may be warranted" for the Hermes copper butterfly.

The finding sets in motion a yearlong status review for the San Diego butterfly, which will lead to a decision of whether or not to propose federal protections.

Environmentalists and federal officials have feuded for nearly 20 years over whether or not to protect the species and another Southern California insect, the Thorne's hairstreak butterfly. The Center for Biological Diversity filed petitions to protect the Hermes copper and Thorne's hairstreak butterflies in 1991 and 2006, both of which were rejected.

The group filed suit last year to challenge the latest decision. The group charged that the Bush administration refused to list the butterflies even after FWS biologists recommended more research

into the matter. Documents obtained by the group under a Freedom of Information Act request show that biologists' call for a "status review" was ignored for political reasons, according to the suit.

The Obama administration settled the legal dispute and agreed to reassess the petitions to list both butterflies. Both insects are now up for more thorough federal review, which could lead to a listing. The Fish and Wildlife Service published a finding last month that protections may be warranted for the Thorne's hairstreak butterfly.

Under the settlement, the service was bound to make an initial finding on the Thorne's hairstreak butterfly by April 2 and the Hermes copper butterfly by May 13.

Both species of butterfly live almost exclusively in the coastal and mountain regions of San Diego County. Wildfires in the region in recent years have destroyed much of their habitat, according to the environmental group.

There are currently 19 butterflies listed as endangered or threatened species of 1,374 domestic species protected under the act.