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Rare valley beetle inches closer to endangered species protection

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Federal officials took a step closer this week toward potentially adding a rare beetle only found in the Coachella Valley to the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

Casey's June beetle is a quirky insect, nearly an inch long, that spends most of its life underground - only emerging for a few weeks in the spring to mate, biologists say.

But decades of local development have cornered it to a stretch of less than 800 acres in south Palm Springs, near Smoke Tree Ranch off East Palm Canyon Drive.

"Our concern is that if there aren't refugia left for this species, they're going to go extinct," said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "They do have a special life cycle."

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials said they'll release on Wednesday a report that puts the economic impact of designating nearly 800 acres as protected habitat for Casey's June beetle at \$12.7 million over 20 years.

Designating habitat wouldn't necessarily stop development, said Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the Carlsbad Fish &



The Casey's June Beetle

(The Desert Sun file photo)

Wildlife office. The \$12.7 million - spread across the total proposed habitat area - includes costs to consult with U.S. Fish & Wildlife, conduct surveys, and offset impacts to the beetle, she said.

The agency first proposed last summer protecting the beetle under the Endangered Species Act and designating habitat.

Hendron said only science - not economics - determine if a species lands on the ESA.

However, Fish & Wildlife conducts economic analyses whenever a habitat area also is proposed, to consider possible boundary changes, she said.

The Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians owns about half of the land in the proposed habitat stretch.