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Critical habitat area for plant proposed near Ft. Irwin

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The federal government proposes to set aside more than 16,000 acres near Fort Irwin as critical habitat to protect a rare member of the pea family.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to set aside 16,156 acres of public land in the Coolgardie Mesa area about 30 miles northwest of Barstow to protect the Lane Mountain milk-vetch, a perennial plant threatened by off-highway vehicle use, mining and development. This decision comes as a result of a lawsuit filed in 2008 against the Fish and

Wildlife Service by the Center for Biological Diversity. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will take public comments on the proposal until June 1.

The plant's habitat is scattered throughout a 20 miles of desert and overlaps the Fort Irwin National Training Center. The Army plans to establish two conservation areas and a no-dig zone on post to protect the plant, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Lane Mountain milk-vetch converts nitrogen into fertilizer that can be used by other plants, said Ileene Anderson, spokesperson for the Center for Biological

Diversity. The plant is scattered through a 20-mile long region of San Bernardino County, primarily in the desert northwest of Barstow. A variety of insects also receive nectar and pollen from the plant, Anderson said.

Comments can be submitted to the Fish and Wildlife Service online at www.regulations.gov for docket number FWS-R8-ES-2009-0078. Comments can also be sent to the Fish and Wildlife Service at 4401 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 222, Arlington, Va. 22203. For more information, call Diane Noda, field supervisor for the Ventura Fish and Wildlife Service office at 805-664-1766.

