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## Enviro group sues to protect endangered species

By Laura Paskus

At the end of April, the Center for Biological Diversity announced it plans to sue the Forest Service for not protecting rare species on lands throughout Arizona and New Mexico.

According to Taylor McKinnon, the center's Public Lands Campaigns Director, the agency has continued to approve projects that destroy endangered species and their habitat without undertaking the monitoring required by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Five years ago, that agency—which enforces compliance with the Endangered Species Act—ordered the Forest Service to monitor rare species and their habitats on all 11 forests in the southwest.

But in a 2008 report, the Forest Service admitted it had not completed such monitoring. The following year, it also requested that the Fish and Wildlife Service change its opinion.

"The Forest Service manages expansive acreage of forests, and that public land is the cradle of life for a whole host of native species, including threatened and endangered species," said McKinnon. "We need the Forest Service to manage its lands in a way that sustains life, rather than dragging species further toward extinction."

The Center's lawsuit will involve at least nine species listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act, including the Mexican spotted owl, southwestern willow flycatcher, Mexico ridge-nosed rattlesnake, Chiricahua leopard frog, Apache trout, Chihuahua chub, loach minnow, spikedace and ocelot.

McKinnon also said that the agency is rolling back existing wildlife protections as it revamps individual forest plans for New Mexico and Arizona.

"We're seeing a really sharp turn away from providing habitat and protections for threatened and endangered species, and other species, in those plans," said McKinnon. He pointed out that though they are inadequate, the current plans—written in the 1980s—do include protection measures for wildlife and their habitat.

But within the draft plans for Arizona, including the Coronado National Forest in southern Arizona, the Forest Service has essentially abandoned wildlife protections, he said. Along with the agency's refusal to monitor the impacts of projects on endangered species, this trend of aggressive rollbacks troubles McKinnon.

"Rather than increasing and enhancing wildlife protections in the Southwest forest plans, forest plans under the Obama administration seems to be heading in the opposite direction," he said. "They

seem to be weakening those protections, and we think that's the opposite of what wildlife in the forests need."

### **Forest management plans are being updated**

In 1976, Congress passed the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), which required each of the nation's forests to have plans that would then guide local management, activities and projects.

Now the agency is updating those plans to incorporate "current thinking and current ways of doing business," Matt Turner, head of regional planning for the agency's Southwest Region, told the Independent. In New Mexico, for example, there are five national forests, as well as the grasslands of the Cibola National Forest. Plans for the grasslands are currently being updated and managers will soon revise the other five plans once the new national rule is in place.

One issue that has become more important in recent years, Turner said, is climate change. "Other issues, based on what was in NFMA, [include] how to address the diversity of plants and animals and maintain their sustainability," he said. "Also, how do we restore and maintain our watersheds? How do we ensure that our communities, rural and urban, maintain their relationships with the forest? And how do the forests provide for the needs of those communities?"

The agency must also manage fire, recreation—everything from hiking and cross-country skiing to off-road vehicle travel—and business. Oil and gas development, for example, is prevalent on the Carson National Forest in northern New Mexico. The planning process, he explained, provides the overall framework for the Forest Service to work on individual projects, including recreation, grazing, energy development and mining.

“Much of the beef people eat comes from cattle grazed on National Forest lands, and, not so much in the Southwest, but in other Forest Service regions, much of the wood that goes to build your homes—and keeps the price of wood construction down—comes off National Forest lands,” said Turner. “There’s quite a bit National Forest lands throughout the country provide—even if you never step foot on Forest Service land, it provides goods and services.”

### **Now’s the time for wilderness**

In 1976, Congress also passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), which guides another federal land agency—the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

Among other things, that law required the BLM to inventory its lands for wilderness characteristics, and to re-examine those lands as time passed in order to designate new wilderness areas. Wilderness areas are permanently protected as off-limits to development and motorized travel.

But the Forest Service has no such mandate, said Nathan Newcomer, associate director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance. It has completed what are called Roadless Area Review and Evaluations: “But they have no mandate, nothing written that says they need to look at their forests and do periodic wilderness inventories,” Newcomer told

the Independent. “This rule should have that—it should direct districts to go out there and study their lands for wilderness-quality designations.”

The alliance is also looking ahead to the development of New Mexico’s individual forest plans, which will be guided by the new national rule.

Of the 9.3 million acres of National Forest lands in the state, 1.6 million of those are roadless, according to Newcomer. Although activists in New Mexico have long focused on wilderness-worthy areas on BLM lands, they’re now looking more actively at the National Forests: “The [revised plan] is one example of why we need to do that: The federal agency is giving us the opportunity,” he said. “We need to make sure that the bevy of beautiful, wild places we have in this state are left intact—not just for the people, but for the land’s sake.”