



Critical habitat for endangered butterfly reduced

11:18 AM PDT on Thursday, June 18, 2009

By JANET ZIMMERMAN
The Press-Enterprise

Critical habitat for the endangered Quino checkerspot butterfly in Riverside and San Diego counties was cut by almost two-thirds Wednesday by U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials, who said more precise mapping techniques allowed them to eliminate 109,480 acres from the land originally cited for protection.

Some tribal lands were excluded because of the potential economic impact, a federal official said.

The inch-long butterfly was listed as an endangered species in 1997. Much of its habitat has been developed and the remaining land has been harmed by the spread of non-native species that kill the insect's host plants.

Environmentalists decried the decision, which they said further threatens the butterfly and eliminated a hurdle for future development that would ruin habitat. The butterfly is threatened by climate change, and much of its habitat has been lost to wildfires, said Ileene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in Los Angeles.

"Southern California will get drier and there will be less precipitation. Chances are these species are going to have to move to find the set of environmental conditions where they can exist, including the plants that larvae live on for most of their life," Anderson said. "It's just appalling that they're not recognizing this could easily be a species that could go extinct in our lifetime."

In 2002, federal officials set aside 171,605 acres for the orange, black and cream checkered butterfly once common throughout Southern California. The wildlife agency proposed cutting it to 98,487 acres after the building industry won a lawsuit challenging the designation. The final ruling this week decreased the area to 62,125 acres. The Sacramento-based Pacific Legal Foundation represented the building industry in the lawsuit protesting what it called the agency's original "sweeping decree with no scientific basis." The industry's lawsuit included land related to the Quino checkerspot butterfly and 26 other species.

"The designations in the state of California have typically been overbroad,"

said Reed Hopper, the group's attorney. "They need to follow credible science, not personal whims or hunches."

Fish and Wildlife officials said the 2002 designation used a broad-brush approach, but since then geographic information systems have improved and scientists could more precisely map the butterfly's essential habitat.

Scientists also discovered a robust Quino population in the Anza area that was unknown in 2002, said Jane Hendron, spokeswoman in the agency's Carlsbad office.

In the past seven years, the agency approved two habitat conservation plans that specifically addressed the needs of the butterfly -- the Western Riverside County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan that is overseen by the county and 14 cities, and one in San Diego County. Those plans "do far greater good to preserve large blocks of habitat for a variety of species," Hendron said.

The critical habitat includes nine areas, six of them in southwest Riverside County north and east of Temecula -- Lake Skinner, the community of Sage, Wilson Valley, Vail Lake, Tule Peak and Bautista. About one-third of the designated land is federally owned, another third is privately owned and the rest is under state or local ownership.

Warm Springs Creek, north of Temecula, was excluded from the designation. The final ruling also excluded tribal lands of the Cahuilla Band of Indians, the Ramona Band of Cahuilla Indians and the Campo Band of Kumeyaay Indians because of the disproportionate economic impacts associated with a critical habitat designation, Hendron said.

The cost of saving the Quino checkerspot butterfly -- estimated to be \$13 million to \$50 million over the next 23 years -- would be borne by developers and government agencies in modifying projects or buying land elsewhere to preserve.

The ruling does not affect land ownership or establish preserves, Hendron said. But development in those areas will be subject to greater scrutiny.

Hendron dismissed claims that the designation is a "blueprint for extinction," which she said is a common environmentalist response to rulings that reduce critical habitat. The agency has good science to back up the decision, she said.

"It's very clearly laid out, it's fully justified," Hendron said.

Reach Janet Zimmerman at 951-368-9586 or jzimmerman@PE.com