
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

APRIL 15, 2010

Property owners claim gnatcatcher not threatened

By DAVID DANELSKI

Attorneys representing property owners petitioned the government this week to remove Endangered Species Act protections for the coastal California gnatcatcher, a regional songbird listed as threatened with extinction.

The gnatcatcher should be delisted and more of its habitat in Southern California should be open for development because robust populations are in the Mexican state of Baja California, said Damien Schiff, an attorney with the Sacramento-based Pacific Legal Foundation.

“This is not a threatened species because it is plentiful in other parts of its range, and this erroneous listing is causing tremendous economic hardship in Southern California at a time when we should be encouraging economic development,” Schiff said.

The foundation petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on behalf of the Property Owners Association of Riverside County, the Coalition of Labor, Agriculture and Business, and a San Diego-area physician who could not subdivide her property east of Del Mar after a pair of the birds were discovered there. The service has 90 days to make an initial finding.

But a biologist with an environmental group said gnatcatchers are an important part of Southern California’s natural history, and the population between the Mexican border and Ventura County should be preserved for future generations.

These birds are a “distinct population segment” that warrant listing, said biologist Ileene Anderson.

The insect-eating birds with blue-gray feathers were once plentiful between Southern California’s coast and the mountains, but their numbers declined dramatically as

they lost most of their coastal sage brush habitat to development.

They were listed as threatened in 1993 after scientists found the California and Mexican birds were separate subspecies, Schiff said.

More recent studies, however, have found that the birds are not subspecies, Schiff added, making the protection unnecessary.

The fish and wildlife service estimated the economic impact of protecting birds will total \$900 million by 2025. The service has designated 197,303 acres in San Diego, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, Los Angeles and Ventura counties as “critical habitat” with certain development restrictions.

Anderson said the remaining California habitat will be needed as the earth’s climate heats up, forcing the birds in Mexico to migrate north.