

THE ISSUE: DELISTING AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

Eagles can't claim full recovery yet

Only 43. That's the number of breeding pairs of desert nesting bald eagle soaring above Arizona today.

These magnificent birds have made a welcome recovery from a low of 18 pairs two decades ago.

But compared with the gains recorded in the rest of the continental United States — from several hundred pairs in the 1960s to 10,000 today — Arizona's success is modest.

Forty-three pairs is certainly not what you could label a stable, thriving population. And it certainly cannot be deemed a full recovery for the desert nesting bald eagle, the only eagle dependent upon a desert habitat.

Last week, the Arizona Game and Fish Department took a pivotal step toward the continued recovery of Arizona's eagle population. It signed an agreement that pledges to continue eagle-conservation efforts.

Game and Fish is part of a coalition that includes federal agencies, private companies and Indian tribes involved with recovery of the state's eagles. But thus far, not all have signed the agreement.

Whether the reluctance is uncertainty with the impending delisting of the bald eagle as a threatened species or just a matter of timing is unknown. Indian tribes make up the bulk of the non-signers. The Yavapai-Apache Nation along the Verde River, a prime habitat for eagles, worries that the voluntary agreement is unclear as to how the eagles and their habitat can be protected.

Much of Arizona's success can be traced to the Bald Eagle Nest Watch Program, which is coordinated by the state Game and Fish Department with input from the 22-member Southwest Bald Eagle Management Committee.

The program was launched in 1978 and staffed by volunteers from the Maricopa Audubon Society. Today, it is manned by 20 paid nest-watchers from February through May, at 10 to 15 breeding areas. The \$135,000 cost is about one-third of the budget dedicated to protecting eagles.

Game and Fish supports delisting the Arizona eagle, citing its success in monitoring the eagle and because, according to director Duane Shroufe, "the Endangered Species Act gets in our way of managing species." However, Shroufe vows that if declassifying the eagle results in reduced contributions and appropriations for eagle protections, the state will pick up the slack.

That's a good commitment, but there's still the question of what one state agency, instead of the federal government, could do in changing



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The bald eagle has made a comeback in Arizona but not as great a comeback as seen in other parts of the country.

policies on federal lands or in areas governed by other state entities.

Not surprisingly, the probable delisting of all eagles — a decision is expected by Feb. 16 — has angered some conservationist groups who fear that Arizona's population will be hurt if the Endangered Species Act that protects the eagle is lifted. The act, passed in 1973, and the ban on the pesticide DDT a year earlier, are the prime reasons why the eagle populations have soared.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Audubon Society are suing the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to maintain the ESA-guaranteed protections for the Arizona eagle and their habitats on private and public lands.

Arizona's population of eagles remains small largely because of a relatively low reproductive rate, high adult mortality, and habitats increasingly threatened by recre-

ation enthusiasts.

We urge Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne to separate the desert nesting bald eagle from any declassification of eagles that he may issue. Arizona's small eagle population most assuredly does not justify the lapsing of federal protections.

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