

Endangered species deal hammered out

THREE ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS, ADMINISTRATION APPROVE PLAN

By Paul Rogers
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In a major truce in America's endangered species battles, the Bush administration agreed Wednesday to speed protections for 29 struggling plant and animal species — including an imperiled insect that has threatened to derail housing developments in Santa Cruz County.

Under the deal, three environmental groups agreed not sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to try and force the species onto the federal endangered species list.

Instead, the Fish and Wildlife Service promised to make decisions — most over the next six months — about whether the 29 species warrant listing and protections. Some of the species in question have



Ohlone tiger beetle
This insect exists only in Santa Cruz County.

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been under consideration as far back as 1975, but the agency has not acted.

"I am pleased that we have been able to cooperate and find common ground that will allow us to protect these species under the Endangered Species Act," said Interior Secretary Gale Norton, who oversees the Fish and Wildlife Service. "I hope this can be a model for future agreements."

Three groups

The environmental groups involved are the California Native Plant Society, the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, and the Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project in Asheville, N.C.

"This is the largest endangered species agreement outside the courts in the history of the act," said Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "It took lots of creativity, patience and hand-wringing."

Environmental groups have claimed for years that the agency has moved too slowly in making endangered species decisions to avoid political controversy. Often when animals or plants are listed as endangered, it can reduce logging, shrink proposed housing subdivisions, reroute road plans or reduce water to farmers from federal projects.

Budget too small

The Fish and Wildlife Service has said its budget is too small to meet the law's deadlines. More recently, it has complained that its staff has been overwhelmed responding to a tidal wave of lawsuits from environmental groups.

The Center for Biological Diversity, for example, still has 42 pending lawsuits nationwide against the agency.

"All the litigation has basically put the agency's workload in meltdown," said Patricia Foulk, a spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Sacramento.

Environmentalists argue

they are only seeking to force the agency to follow the law.

"What they have been tied up with is court orders to do their job," said Suckling. "It's not unreasonable for a court to tell them to do their job."

In the Bay Area, Wednesday's deal means the Fish and Wildlife Service has agreed to make a final decision about whether to list as endangered the Ohlone tiger beetle, known to exist only in five areas in Santa Cruz County.

In 1998, a Santa Cruz activist filed a petition with the federal government asking it to declare the green bug endangered, noting that its numbers have plummeted because of urban development and invasive plants.

Housing in habitat

Several areas cited as beetle habitat by Grey Hayes, the Santa Cruz biologist who coordinated studies leading to the petition, have been slated for housing developments, most notably in the Glenwood Drive area of Scotts Valley — one of the city's last large open meadows.

Under Wednesday's agreement, the Fish and Wildlife Service will make emergency listings of three species as endangered. They are the Carson's wandering skipper, a butterfly found in Lassen County and in Washoe County, Nev., and harmed by water diversions and livestock grazing; the pygmy rabbit, of which only 50 remain in Washington; and the Tumbling Creek cave snail, found in just one Missouri cave.

The agency also agreed to issue final decisions whether it will list 14 other species by next year.

IF YOU'RE INTERESTED

For more information go to the Fish and Wildlife Service's Web site: <http://endangered.fws.gov> or the Center for Biological Diversity's site at www.sw-center.org/swcbd/

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