

Local land designated as murrelet habitat

Move doesn't stop logging

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SANTA CRUZ — Land in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties is included in 3.9 million acres that have been designated a critical habitat for the recovery of the marbled murrelet, an endangered seabird that nests in old-growth forests.

The habitat takes in wooded areas in Washington, Oregon and California, including property owned by Big Creek Lumber in Davenport and Big Basin Redwoods State Park. About 48,000 acres of the habitat is in Central California.

"It focuses attention on the forest stands that have the best potential for maintaining murrelet populations," said local researcher Steve Singer, who became interested in the birds while a park ranger at Big Basin in 1972.

The critical habitat is one of the largest ever designated, according

to Mike Spear, regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

"It would probably make the top 10 list," he said. The critical habitat for the spotted owl is about 6.9 million acres.

Spear made the announcement Wednesday morning in response to a federal court order that called for the service to complete the designation of the habitat by May 15.

Three million of the total 3.9 million acres of critical habitat are federal land, he said. About 800,000 acres are state land; 9,000 acres county; and 1,000 acres city. About 1 percent of the habitat, 48,000 acres, is privately owned.

The key point of the designation is it points out the importance of the land to the marbled murrelet, Spear said.

At the same time, it does not make the designated land a reserve for the birds.

Officials conceded that the designation will have little effect, if any,

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on timber harvest or other activities. In Oregon and Washington, the marbled murrelets have held up some logging operations that are still being battled in court.

About 78 percent of the habitat for the murrelets is land where timber harvesting is already restricted under the Northwest Forest Plan.

While limited in power, the designation would carry more than just moral persuasion, according to the service.

It would require federal agencies that authorize, fund or carry out activities to consult with the fish and wildlife service when murrelet critical habitat may be affected. It also requires those agencies to avoid the adverse modification or destruction of the land.

Private landowners would only have to consult with the service if they are receiving federal funds or

have other federal involvement in their property.

Bud McCrary, co-owner of Big Creek Lumber in Davenport, said his company is already operating under state restrictions to protect the murrelets. For example, it is limited to cutting trees during a period between September and April in areas where the bird flies overhead to get to Butano State Park.

A couple of thousand acres of his land are in the critical habitat announced Wednesday.

There is a possibility of more restrictions under a conservation plan being prepared by the federal wildlife service, McCrary said. The total effect on landowners, he said, is still unknown.

Biologists estimate there are between 18,500 and 38,500 marbled murrelets in the three states. Gary Miller, a forest resource supervisor for the service in Portland, Ore., said there may be between

700 and 800 in the Santa Cruz region.

Santa Cruz is the southern most area where the murrelets are found. It is recognized as an endangered species in California.

"It's important that the Santa Cruz Mountains population be protected," said Singer, who is a researcher specializing in the birds for the Santa Cruz City Museum of Natural History and Humboldt State University Foundation. "It is so isolated from other populations."

If the population dies here, it likely won't come back, he said.

The bird is amazing, he said, citing how it spends much of its time in the ocean, but is adaptable enough to come inland to nest.

"It lives in two entirely different worlds," he said.

Only 95 tree nests of the elusive bird have been located in all of North America, all in old-growth stands of the Pacific coast.