



ENDANGERED SPECIES: Group to sue NPS, BLM over Arizona Strip

April Reese, Land Letter Western reporter

An environmental group signaled this week its intent to sue the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management over new management plans for federal lands in northwestern Arizona that the group says fail to protect the desert tortoise, the California condor and several other species.

The plans for the 2.8-million-acre Arizona Strip, a vast swath of public lands just north of the Grand Canyon that includes parts of two national monuments, Grand Canyon-Parashant and Vermilion Cliffs, authorize a host of activities that will harm the tortoise, the condor and 10 other imperiled species, said Jay Lininger of the Center for Biological Diversity's Flagstaff, Ariz., office. Livestock grazing, oil and gas development, off-highway vehicle use, uranium mining and construction of power lines conducted under the authority of the plans could degrade habitat for the species, a violation of the Endangered Species Act, he said. "All of those activities combined destroy habitat for these plants and animals," Lininger said.

In addition to the tortoise and the condor, the other federally protected

species at risk from those activities include the Mexican spotted owl, southwestern willow flycatcher, Yuma clapper rail, Virgin River chub, woundfin, Brady pincushion cactus, Holmgren milk vetch, Jones' Cycladenia, Siler pincushion cactus and Welsh's milkweed, according to the notice, filed Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's biological opinion on the plans concluded that they would not jeopardize the continued existence of the species. "Through the proposed plan, BLM and NPS are striving to implement recovery action items from approved recovery plans and conservation agreements," the agency wrote in its Nov. 7 opinion on the draft plans. Specific projects carried out under the plans, such as mining proposals or new exploration wells, would require greater scrutiny by FWS and "allow for minimizing and tracking the actual effects of those actions," according to the biological opinion.

FWS's lengthiest discussion of potential effects of the plans concerns the tortoise. The agency notes that tortoise habitat near populated areas covered in the

plans may already be degraded and predicts that up to 20 tortoises could be injured or killed by project activities carried out under the plans over the next two decades. But the tortoises can be moved to help reduce such incidents, and activities can be timed so that they are carried out during periods when the tortoise is inactive, FWS said.

But the center contends that all three agencies -- the National Park Service, which administers Vermilion Cliffs National Monument; BLM, which oversees Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument and the rest of the federal lands on the Strip; and FWS -- ignored the cumulative damage to the tortoise and the 11 other species named in the suit.

A push 'to go back to the drawing board'

"It's our hope that the agencies take this notice letter seriously and go back to the drawing board and produce new plans that we can all be proud of," Lininger said.

The center may eventually also file suit against FWS over its biological opinion but decided to sue BLM and the Park Service first to address the problems with the management

plans, he added.

Lorraine Christian, field manager for BLM's Arizona Strip office, declined to comment, citing agency policy not to talk to the press about pending litigation. Attempts to reach the Park Service were unsuccessful.

BLM said in issuing the plans last spring that they are the result of extensive public input and collaboration with many different agencies and area tribes.

The FWS biologist who worked on the biological opinion and the supervisor of FWS's Flagstaff office were both out of the office yesterday and could not be reached for comment.

The Arizona Strip is under increasing recreation pressure as St. George and other surrounding communities continue to grow. The population in the five-county region is expected to double by 2020, with the addition of about 1.4 million new residents.

April Reese writes from Santa Fe, N.M.