

'Angora' woodpecker may find federal protection

By AP

GRANTS PASS, Ore. – A woodpecker that depends on intense wildfires for the standing dead trees where it feeds on insects is being considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

This is the same woodpecker that affected the U.S. Forest Service's rehab project in the Angora burn area.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Monday it will take a closer look at the black-backed woodpecker. A decision is due in a year but could take longer due to budget cuts.



The black-backed woodpecker affected U.S. Forest Service plans for parts of the Angora burn area. Photo/LTN file

Fish and Wildlife is considering two populations of the woodpecker – one inhabiting the Sierra of California and eastern Cascade Range of Oregon, and another in the Black Hills of South Dakota and Wyoming. Another Northern Rockies population is not under consideration.

The agency said conservation groups that petitioned to protect the birds presented substantial scientific information that they were suffering a loss of habitat because of fire suppression, salvage logging that removes fire-killed trees, and thinning to reduce the intensity of wildfires.

The decision is giving conservation groups hope the bird can force changes in national wildfire policy the same way the northern spotted owl overhauled the idea of logging old-growth forests.

Chad Hanson, staff ecologist of the John Muir Project of the Earth Island Institute, said the woodpecker has already figured in lawsuits to stop salvage logging.

“We hope as a result of this, the Forest Service will in fact not only pay more attention to species like this, but do a proactive job of educating people that when fire happens, it is not a bad thing, wildlife rely upon it,” Hanson said. “These notions of catastrophic wildfire are really just politics and ignorance, and reflect outdated thinking.”

Forest Service spokesman Larry Chambers said the agency’s wildfire policy was not changing because the bird was not yet listed as a threatened or endangered species. He added that the agency already took “science-based actions to protect its habitat.”

The agency has also said budget cuts this year will force it to let more fires burn – a prospect Hanson said would benefit the woodpecker and a broad range of species.

Tom Partin, president of the American Forest Resources Council, a timber industry group, said the bird didn’t need any Endangered Species Act protection, because it was already getting plenty of new habitat each year from millions of acres that burn but are not harvested as salvage. He added there is a major debate going on over the role of the Forest Service on the national forests.

“Are they going to be a firefighting agency, or a land management agency?” he said. “Right now, half the budget is going to firefighting. A tenth of it is going to forest management.”

Hanson noted that major salvage logging is being planned for two areas that burned last year in prime black-backed woodpecker habitat, one on the Plumas National Forest in the Sierras, and another on the Winema-Fremont and Modoc national forests near Lakeview, Ore.