

Environmentalists file 13 lawsuits against Bush administration

by Mike Lee - CNS

SAN DIEGO, Cal. - Environmental groups filed 13 lawsuits Wednesday against the Bush administration, alleging that it fails to protect imperiled species because of political meddling and other inadequacies.

Mentioned in the litigation were at least five species with current or former habitat in San Diego County: the spreading navarretia, thread-leaved brodiaea, San Diego ambrosia, red-legged frog and arroyo toad.

Dozens of related lawsuits are in the works, signaling a heightened battle with national implications for how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service takes care of plants and animals close to extinction.

The agency already was reeling from investigations that found a top former official heavily reshaping scientific reports about endangered species.

Fighting the lawsuits will keep Fish and Wildlife officials embroiled in a costly controversy over how they set the boundaries for "critical habitat," or land deemed essential to the survival of threatened and endangered plants and animals. The results will affect developers, farmers and several other groups, especially in areas like San Diego County that have numerous rare species.

Earthjustice and the Center for Biological Diversity filed the suits in federal district court because they said the Bush administration has improperly interfered in management decisions of the Fish and Wildlife Service. Specifically, the organizations said designations of "critical habitat" have been slashed without scientific justification.

"The red-legged frog, arroyo toad and golden sedge have evolved over millions of years. It is immoral to sacrifice them for political gain," said Michael Senatore, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity. "Federal scientists are doing their best to save endangered species, but are overruled at every turn by Bush administration bureaucrats."

Fish and Wildlife Service officials declined to discuss the lawsuits.

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