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## Proposal would shrink endangered sheep habitat

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By JENNIFER BOWLES

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Federal wildlife officials proposed Wednesday to remove some 460,000 acres from land they once considered crucial for the survival of an endangered species that roams the Inland mountains, leaving less than half of a so-called habitat designation in place for peninsular bighorn sheep.

The move would lift the designation and possible development restrictions from more than 4,000 acres of a Coachella Valley tribe's reservation in the foothills around Palm Springs and Cathedral City. But environmentalists said the larger proposal would drive the bighorn sheep further toward extinction because it removes protections to key canyons across the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains that are vital for food and water.

"It essentially is taking someone who lives in a three-room house and locking them into one room so they can't get to their kitchen," said Joan Taylor, a representative in the local Sierra Club chapter.

"When the lambs are young, their mothers need this rich forage to get adequate nutrition," she said.

Officials at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said they want to scale down the critical habitat designation from 844,897 acres across Riverside, San Diego and Imperial counties, to 384,410 acres in part because some areas in a



2005 / The Press-Enterprise

Federal wildlife officials said they want to remove about 460,000 acres from the critical habitat designation because some areas are not used by the Peninsular bighorn sheep.

2001 habitat designation are not used by the sheep.

"It's more refined," said Jane Hendron, an agency spokeswoman. "There were areas included in that designation that didn't have documented use for many years."

Critical habitat designations typically add another level of scrutiny to large-scale projects within the boundaries. The proposed designation will be finalized after a public comment period ends Dec. 10.

Lisa Belenky, staff attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, which sued to get the 2001 designation, said the reduction in critical habitat would be one of the largest-ever acreage cuts for an endangered species.

Peninsular bighorn sheep were protected under the federal Endangered Species Act in 1998 because of urban encroachment and disease that left the population at 290. The latest figures from 2006 estimated the population to be 793 from the Palm Springs area to the Mexican border, Hendron said.

Still, that number represents a fraction of the historic population, Belenky said.

The new designation was sparked by a 2005 lawsuit filed by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, which sought to remove 4,512 acres, or about one-eighth of its reservation, from the designation. In the lawsuit, the tribe said that would cost them hundreds of million of dollars in delays and diminished property values.

Tom Davis, the tribe's chief of planning and development, said Wednesday the tribe has no plans for development on the land.

He said the tribe's concern with the designation, in part, was a lack of recognition that the tribe has a special status with the federal government, which gave the tribe a reservation smaller than its historical use.

In addition, he said, the tribe is working on its own habitat conservation plan designed to provide protections for the bighorn sheep and about a dozen other species.

"This is not like a city or county or other federal agency," Davis said.

"The tribe recognizes they must be good stewards of the land, but let's not arbitrarily restrict or infringe on the use you promised us."