



Flowering herb lucky to be on protected lands

ENDANGERED: A federal agency says, however, the habitat of the milk-vetch already is protected.

11:41 PM PST on Wednesday, December 14, 2005

By HENRI BRICKEY / The Press-Enterprise

Land on which the endangered Coachella Valley milk-vetch grows will not be designated as critical habitat, federal officials announced Wednesday.

The milk-vetch, an herb that grows to about a foot in height and produces pinkish-purple flowers, was listed as an endangered plant in 1998, primarily due to development pressures.

The plant's primary habitat ranges from just east of Cabazon to Indio. The plant also exists in limited areas of the Chuckwalla Valley north of Desert Center. The plant is often found in wind-blown dunes or flat areas and also along sandy washes.

Jane Hendron, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said that labeling milk-vetch habitat as critical would be redundant, because the areas where the milk-vetch grows is covered under other wildlife-protection plans.

One such plan is the Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard habitat conservation plan. Another plan, the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan, is aiming to protect 27 imperiled species, including the milk-vetch. The plan is expected to be approved next spring.

Environmentalists fighting for the plant's protection said Wednesday that they might challenge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision in court. "Zero critical habitat means zero boost to recovery of the Coachella Valley Milk-Vetch, keeping it endangered and on its deathbed," Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist with the Center for Biological Diversity in Joshua Tree said in a written statement. The group had sued the wildlife agency to force the habitat designation.

Others applauded the agency's decision not to list the milk-vetch. Ed Kibbey, executive director of the Building Industry Association of Southern California Desert Chapter, said

such designations are expensive for landowners and can impede important projects.

He said delays in the construction of overpasses along Interstate 10 can be attributed to the presence of milk-vetch in the area.

Online at:

http://www.pe.com/localnews/hemet/stories/PE_News_Local_H_milkvetch15.181bdc5e.html