

Groups urge protection for fishers

By The Associated Press

HELENA - The Northern Rockies fisher, a member of the weasel family, is in serious decline and warrants protection under the federal Endangered Species Act, four groups say in a petition sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday.

In the Northern Rockies the fisher is known to exist only in Montana and Idaho but may also be present in Wyoming, where the animal existed historically, said Defenders of Wildlife, one of the groups. Populations have been hurt by logging in fisher habitat and by the trapping of up to seven fishers a year in Montana, petition author David Gaillard said from the Defenders office in Bozeman.

John Graham, a Montana Trappers Association vice president, responded that trapping seasons and quotas are based on research by Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologists, and the agency would not allow trapping "if they didn't think we had a population that would sustain the harvest."

In 2004, the Fish and Wildlife Service found that the West Coast fisher, which Gaillard said is the same as the Northern Rockies fisher but geographically distinct, warranted federal protection. But the agency said other wildlife priorities precluded granting protected status.

Threats to the Northern Rockies fisher are similar to those of the West Coast population, Gaillard said, and obtaining even a federal acknowledgment of population sensitivity would be a plus. He said there is no fisher population estimate for Montana and Idaho but "several hundred animals is a good ballpark estimate."

Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Sharon Rose in Denver said information in the petition will be used to determine within 90 days whether the agency should look further at the condition of the Northern Rockies fisher. The agency may issue a negative finding during the 90-day period, shelving the petition, or decide to gather more information in the ensuing nine months. At the end of that time, the Fish and Wildlife Service would state whether it proposes protecting the fisher under the Endangered Species Act.

Fishers are agile furbearers, sometimes likened to otters, that live in forests and prey on porcupines, snowshoe hares and other small mammals and birds. Fisher populations in the eastern United States and the upper Midwest are relatively abundant, said Noah Greenwald of the Center for Biological Diversity, which joined Defenders of Wildlife, Friends of the Clearwater and Friends of the Bitterroot in filing the petition.

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