

Critical hearing set on reducing bighorn sheep's prime habitat

Sept. 10 is D-day for the Peninsular bighorn sheep. And, local sheep advocates are hoping the D doesn't stand for developers.

On that Wednesday, two public hearings will be held in Palm Desert to gather input on whether the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should reduce the federally-designated critical habitat for the endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep. The FWS first proposed

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cutting the critical habitat from 844,897 acres to 384,410 acres last October.

Based on public comments received last fall, the FWS has added about 36,240 acres back into the plan that, if approved, will reduce critical habitat for the sheep by more than 50 percent. Anza-Borrego Desert State Park Superintendent Mark Jorgensen who has worked on bighorn sheep recovery for more than three decades said the reduction of habitat is the wrong way to go.

"I'm going to fight it," Jorgensen said, although he has plans to be in Mongolia on the day of the hearing.

Jorgensen said the critical habitat boundaries that date back to 2001, three years after Peninsular bighorn sheep became a federally-endangered species, are correct in their current form. He called the reduction of habitat "politically motivated," and said he didn't buy that the FWS was simply making map corrections based on scientific data.

"They're trying to make us look like buffoons who mistakenly dedicated sheep habitat," Jorgensen said. "What they want to do is fragment critical habitat into three segments and that just defies modern science."

The latest proposal was published Aug. 26 in the Federal Register and is available at www.regulations.gov. The revised rule applies to habitat in Riverside, San Diego, and Imperial counties. The revision was prompted by a 2005 lawsuit by the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians which argued that inclusion of tribal lands within critical habitat was unlawful.

"The essence is the FWS is playing right into the hands of developers," Jorgensen said.

The public hearings will both be at The Living Desert, 47-900 Portola Ave. in Palm Desert. The first is from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. and the second is from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. on Wednesday, Sept. 10. Written comments are due by Oct. 27.