



Lynx but not their habitats to be protected in New Mexico

By Andrew Oxford

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Federal protections for Canada lynx will be extended to Northern New Mexico, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Thursday (Sept. 11).

The feline has been listed as threatened with extinction under the Endangered Species Act since 2000. The listing protected lynx in 14 states but not New Mexico, where more than 60 of the animals are known to live.

Thursday's two-part decision will expand federal protections to Canada lynx throughout the lower 48 states but will not expand protections for the animal's habitat in the Southern Rockies.

Environmental groups which have petitioned for Canada lynx in New Mexico to be protected under the Endangered Species Act since 2007 criticized the decision as falling short in protecting the animal.

"By ignoring huge swaths of currently occupied lynx habitat, the Service is undermining lynx recovery efforts yet again," said Drew Kerr, carnivore advocate for Santa Fe-based WildEarth Guardians. "To survive threats including climate change, motorized recreation, development, logging, and fossil fuel extraction, lynx need habitat protections throughout their range."

Lynx are specially adapted to living in mature boreal forests with dense cover and deep snowpack. Had such areas of Northern New Mexico been designated as critical habitat for the lynx, the land could have been subject to special management and protection.

In its decision, however, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service suggested the state's lynx population is not self-sustaining.

"Some of the lynx introduced into Colorado have dispersed into mountainous areas of Northern New Mexico, which contain relatively small and fragmented areas of similar high-elevation spruce/fir and cold mixed-conifer habitats," the agency's decision said. "No evidence exists that lynx occupied these or any other areas of New Mexico historically, and habitats in New Mexico are thought to be incapable of supporting a self-sustaining lynx population."

In a statement issued after Thursday's decision, WildEarth Guardians and the Western Environmental Law Center argued federal officials ignored "historic records confirming lynx presence throughout the Cascade and Rocky Mountains before excessive hunting and trapping nearly wiped them out."

The Fish and Wildlife Service designated new critical habitat for lynx in northern Maine and northwestern Wyoming to create a total of 38,954 square miles of protected habitat in Idaho, Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming and Washington.

U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management officials in New Mexico will be required to ensure activities they authorize or fund do not harm lynx, however, according to Matthew Bishop, an attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center.

Though the group called for broader critical habitat protections, Bishop described Thursday's ruling as "a great victory for lynx in New Mexico."

"Previously, lynx lost their federal protective status once they crossed the Colorado state line," he said.

A lack of federal protections contributed to the death of 14 of the state's 61 known lynx, the group alleges. The tracking collar of one lynx was once found in a dump near Taos and two were shot near Chama, Bishop said.

Designation as a threatened species means lynx are considered likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the "take" of a threatened animal — hunting, pursuing, wounding, trapping or harming, for example — is illegal without a permit.