

Feds craft lynx-habitat proposal (AP News, 29 Feb 2008)

Federal wildlife managers have dramatically increased the amount of land they want to designate as critical habitat for the Canada lynx, a threatened species. Wildlife advocates were cautious as they waited to see whether the proposal would stick, while some were upset no area in the southern Rockies was included. The USFWS said Thursday it wants to designate 42,753 sq mi in 6 states that could come under tighter federal oversight as critical habitat. That's more than 20x the 1,841 sq mi in 3 states the agency designated in late 2006.

A final decision might not come until Feb 15, 2009. Fish and Wildlife said it was accepting public comments on the proposal until April 28, 2008. The agency reconsidered its earlier rulings about the lynx and 7 other species after allegations that Julie MacDonald, a deputy assistant secretary of the interior, interfered in the decisions. She has resigned. States where land would now be designated as critical lynx habitat are Maine, Minnesota, Idaho, Montana, Washington, and Wyoming. Colorado, where state wildlife officials have been reintroducing lynx, was not included.

The USFWS said it was uncertain whether Colorado's reintroduced population would sustain itself. In 2007 state biologists found no new kittens, down from 11 in 2006 and 50 in 2005. Lynx trapped in Canada were released in southwest Colorado beginning in 1999. Joshua Pollock, conservation director for Center for Native Ecosystems, said a habitat designation was crucial to recovering lynx in the southern Rockies.

"Their habitat continues to get logged, cut up by development. Lynx are run over on highways, accidentally trapped and shot. We need to see critical habitat taken seriously in the southern Rockies. Today's proposal is definitely a blow to that need," Pollock said.

Colorado Division of Wildlife spokesman Tyler Baskfield said the lynx already is considered a "species of concern" in Colorado, and populations of the cat are closely monitored. The Kettle Range in Washington wasn't included either. USFWS said there was no evidence of a reproducing lynx population in the last 20 years. The Maine land proposed as habitat includes property in the Moosehead Lake region where Plum Creek Timber Co. has proposed nearly 1,000 house lots and 2 resorts.