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Lynx habitat designation brings minimal change

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A proposal to protect Canada lynx habitat doesn't significantly change management practices on the ground, but it does mean more federal regulation.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service intends to designate critical habitat for the Canada lynx. The designation includes some federal, state and private land in Montana.

The public was invited to a Thursday meeting at the TownHouse Inn to learn more about the proposal.

The Canada lynx, a wildcat known for its big paws, is a threatened species on the Endangered Species Act list.

About 27,000 square miles are part of the boundaries of the habitat designation in portions of Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Idaho and Washington.

In Montana, areas proposed for designation include some state and private land in Flathead, Glacier, Granite, Lake, Lewis and Clark, Lincoln, Missoula, Pondera, Powell and Teton counties.

Critical habitat includes thick forest landscapes with beneficial resources for the lynx, like snowshoe hares for prey. In Montana, the critical habitat designation includes Glacier National Park and some state and private lands, but no lands in the Little Belt Mountains.

The designation does not affect private actions on private land. It does not allow government or public access to private land or create a wildlife preserve, said Lori Nordstrom, a FWS wildlife biologist in Helena.

"We don't anticipate anything new or different," she said. "It's purely regulatory."

The designation means when federal agencies take action on land with a federal permit, they must make sure it does not negatively affect lynx habitat. Federal agencies are already doing that, she said.

Josh Lodge, the Montana Trappers Association District 4 sub-director, questioned if the proposal could stop logging projects.

Future roadwork on federal land, water quality permits and some logging on lands in the designated areas could be reviewed to ensure that actions don't harm lynx habitat. That doesn't mean those actions would be denied. Logging, for example, in the long-term

could improve lynx habitat in some cases.

"I don't anticipate this would limit logging," Nordstrom said.

With the listing of the lynx as a threatened species in 2000, people could no longer trap lynx, Lodge said. Ideally, he would like to see the population recover so trapping can resume.

O.M. Mabry of Great Falls said he has seen lynx in the Bear Paw Mountains south of Havre. Mabry said he supports protecting lynx habitat.

Forest Service land, the Flathead Indian Reservation and some Bureau of Land Management land is not included in the proposed designation. Those agencies and the Salish Kootenai already have guidelines to protect lynx. The FWS also did not include Colorado or the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem in the designation.

The FWS proposal is being completed to comply with a court order.

David Gaillard, with Predator Conservation Alliance, one of several conservation organizations that sued to protect the Canada lynx, said the critical habitat designation is important.

Under the Endangered Species Act, a person cannot kill a lynx or jeopardize its survival. The critical habitat designation takes a more proactive step toward management, he said.

The habitat designation ensures that actions taken by the federal government protect and promote lynx habitat, he said.

"We fully support critical habitat designation," he said. "It's been a long time in the making."

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