



The Maine Public Broadcasting Network

Canadian Lynx To Benefit From Habitat in Maine

February 24, 2009 Reported By: Susan Sharon

Large landowners are disappointed, but Maine environmental groups are applauding a revised decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to designate 9,400 square miles of northern Maine as critical habitat for the Canada lynx. Three years ago the Service issued a decision excluding Maine timberlands from lynx habitat. But when questions were raised about the scientific integrity of that decision, the Service agreed to reconsider.



Listed as a threatened species under federal law, lynx are imperiled in the northwest, in the state of Minnesota and in Maine, the only eastern state with a breeding population. Designating critical habitat is expected to help boost the cats' chances of survival.

Lori Nordstrom of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says it will add an extra layer of review for development and other projects that already require federal permits and that could harm lynx habitat. "People think this is a new thing, but we're already reviewing projects for their effects on lynx--federal projects, federal funding or permits for their effects on lynx and any other endangered species. So this is just another layer of review that we will do."

Nordstrom says critical habitat designation on 9,400 acres in northern and western Maine will not interfere with timber harvesting. Some landowners, however, will be excluded from the rules: The Passamaquoddy Tribe, the Nature Conservancy, the Forest Society of Maine, Katahdin Forest Products and Elliotsville Plantation won't be subject to the extra layer of review. That's because they are part of a program run by the Natural Resources Conservation Service that provides funding for research and management of the lynx.

Plum Creek and other landowners had hoped to be excluded too, but a voluntary management plan they proposed was rejected. Plum Creek spokesman Mark Doty says he's disappointed about the added regulation. "We don't know what that extra layer of review means, and we expect that it will mean some time delays and possibly some mitigation measures or project cancellations but we will wait and see and we will plan on working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on those."

Both Doty and Patrick Strauch of the Maine Forest Products Council say the voluntary agreement with landowners would have achieved greater benefits for lynx habitat than the federal critical habitat designation and would also have provided landowners with longterm business certainty and flexibility.

"We felt there were some real serious deficiencies in that approach," says Sally Stockwell, of the Maine Audubon Society, which is welcoming the reversal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "This designation will really require some very careful analysis of any kind of development and increased traffic that might occur in the North Woods."

And Jym St. Pierre of RESTORE: the North Woods calls it "great news." "One of the great benefits of getting the critical habitat designation is the public education. People still don't realize that we have this extraordinary species here, and also it helps to raise the visibility of the Canada lynx in terms of making sure that people who are out there trapping bobcats, for example, are not inadvertently trapping lynx."

Conservation groups filed suit over the decision not to include critical habitat in Maine in 2006. The federal government agreed to reconsider its action after it was learned that an Interior Department official may have interfered with the process. The official later resigned.