



California Native Plant Society

Center for Biological Diversity

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**Groups challenge Bush administration to protect endangered species
and public health at BLM Clear Creek Management Area**

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SAN JOSE – The Center for Biological Diversity (Center) and the California Native Plant Society (CNPS) today filed a lawsuit against the Bush administration and U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) seeking protection of the San Benito Evening Primrose and its habitat in the Clear Creek Management Area, near Coalinga in San Benito and Fresno Counties, as required by the Endangered Species Act.

Due to off-road vehicle damage and limited range, the San Benito Evening Primrose (*Camissonia benitensis*) was listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on February 12, 1985. The Primrose lives only on the asbestos-rich serpentine soils found at Clear Creek. Clear Creek's diverse, rare and exceptional flora also includes seven other extremely imperiled plants. The CNPS has been working to improve management of the area for over 20 years.

The FWS has identified off road vehicle use as the principle threat to the Primrose and its habitat since the plant was listed in 1985. However, the BLM proposed no measures to reduce off-roading damage until 1998, and almost none of the protection proposals have actually been implemented.

Instead, off-roading has greatly proliferated. There has been a 15% increase in off-road vehicles at Clear Creek over the last three years, an increase of approximately 7,500 visitors. Currently 900-1200 miles of off-road routes crisscross the Clear Creek Management Area, 3-4 times the 1998 level. Off-road vehicle damage to the Clear Creek's fragile serpentine barrens has also expanded exponentially. Off-roading damage to the Primrose and its habitat has been documented for many years, and limits on direct incidents of damage to the plant set by the BLM and FWS to protect the species have been routinely exceeded.

Despite the documented off-road vehicle damage to the Primrose and its habitat, and despite legal requirements to protect the plant, the BLM has actually encouraged increased off-road use in Clear Creek. In 2004, BLM allowed several motorcycle "enduro" races in the area, including one upstream from Larious Canyon, site of an important Primrose population. Two to three hundred motorcycles participate in the enduros, causing widespread habitat damage and sedimentation onto Primrose populations.



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“We never wanted to bring this matter to court”, said Brian LeNeve, Vice President of the Monterey Chapter of CNPS. “Our volunteers and staff have worked with BLM for decades to fix the problems at Clear Creek. We have provided scientific information, participated in oversight committees, and met extensively with the BLM and off-road groups. Meanwhile, damage to the area – the only place in the world where this Primrose lives - has only escalated.”

Emily B. Roberson, CNPS Senior Policy Analyst added, “We have worked with BLM and waited for decades for them to keep their promises to protect this unique habitat and the species that depend on it.”

Roberson continued, “But off-road use and damage has only escalated and the Bush BLM still allows off-road races in this plant’s habitat, almost 20 years after off-road vehicle damage forced the plant to be placed on the federal endangered species list. We have no choice but to ask the courts to enforce the law. The action offers the Bush administration a real opportunity to reach out to solve an important conservation problem.”

CNPS and the Center also noted that Clear Creek includes a wilderness study area and a Research Natural Area, established to study and conserve the area's asbestos-rich serpentine soils and the special plants that depend on them. Both conservation areas require protection under BLM rules. Only a few types of plants have adapted to the harsh conditions in the chemically unique serpentine soils. Because serpentine areas are so rich in rare plants and animals, scientists, agencies, and conservationists all identify them as high priority conservation areas.

“This web of life at Clear Creek is special,” said Daniel R. Patterson, an Ecologist with the Center who formerly worked with BLM in California. “There are many rare and unique species here besides the Primrose, and the scale of off-road damage is excessive and unacceptable. Off-roading harms fragile serpentine habitats, destroys rare plants, creates noise and sediment, and generates clouds of asbestos dust, dramatically lessening the area’s value for hikers, hunters, birders and wildflower watchers and putting their health at risk.”

Contact Emily Roberson for Clear Creek photos.

Additional information and photos: <http://www.cnps.org/federalissues/ClearCreek.htm>

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