

Greg Beatty/R2/FWS/DOI
06/02/2006 11:21 AM

To Mary Richardson/R2/FWS/DOI@FWS
cc
bcc
Subject Fw: eagles--more

Greg Beatty
US Fish and Wildlife Service
2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103
Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602-242-0210

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DO EAGLES STILL NEED PROTECTION?

By most accounts, the bald eagle has been saved from extinction.

Good news, right?

That's what fans of America's most noble symbol have been wondering since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last month made noises about removing it from the Endangered Species List.

The eagles' population has skyrocketed nationally since the bird was listed in 1978.

But environmentalists worry about the bird losing the protection and funds accorded it by the Endangered Species Act.

In Arizona, the small group of eagles that dwell on the cliff sides and treetops in the central part of the state have shared in the national success, doubling their numbers in the past 15 years and yielding 42 babies in 2004, thanks to an intensive state program that started with a handful of eagles 25 years ago.

The nature of that stewardship could change under delisting, some environmentalists and bird experts say.

They fear that the complicated program run by the Arizona Department of Game and Fish for the past quarter-century could be damaged. But Game and Fish officials, who support delisting, say the program would remain in force.

Success in Arizona

The merits of the Arizona effort are unquestioned. The eagle population has swelled from a handful of breeding pairs in the 1970s to the current 41. The number of known breeding areas has grown to 45 from 11.

Dr. Bob Witzeman, a retired physician and conservation chairman of the Maricopa Audubon Society, credits the comeback to the stewardship of the Salt River Project and government agencies.

"I've been with this bird since the 1970s when there were five pair of eagles in Arizona. The eagle program began as a weekend volunteer

effort by the U.S. Forest Service and Maricopa Audubon Society in 1978," said Witzeman, who opposes delisting. The goal was to monitor bald eagles in the breeding areas most threatened by recreational use.

SRP became involved in the 1980s when it created reservoirs that flooded eagle-nesting areas along the Salt and Verde rivers. By the 1990s, SRP was committing thousands of dollars a year to helping eagles. Since 2002, a conservation agreement with U.S. Fish and Wildlife requires SRP to support the eagles. Now, the public utility annually spends about \$30,000 for an eagle nest-watch program and helicopter services and additional funds as other projects come up.

The Fish and Wildlife management plan created the Southwestern Bald Eagle Management Committee, an 18-member group of government agencies, Native American communities, SRP and Arizona Public Service Co. Game and Fish manages the program in the field and most years reports the number of eagles is growing.

"It's a success story; we're very proud of that. The act is no longer needed for the species," said James Driscoll, bald-eagle management coordinator at Game and Fish, which supports delisting.

The department's program focuses on propagation and requires the assistance of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and U.S. Park Service to monitor, protect and close breeding areas at sensitive times. SRP and APS provide helicopters and other help in monitoring nests. A key component is the extensive nest-watch program where trained workers camp out, keep humans from disrupting nests and spy on nesting eagles through telescopes.

According to Driscoll, little would change under delisting. The law requires monitoring for five years to detect any reverses in the delisted animals' fortunes. Game and Fish has prepared a post-delisting plan for managing Arizona's eagles, which includes protection for breeding areas.

Money matters

Voices outside government are not optimistic that the plans will be carried out in practice.

Robin Silver of the Southwestern Center for Biological Diversity suggests the tight budgets of the federal agencies involved will direct money away from eagles once they are no longer a priority.

"Arizona eagles have probably been monitored more than any other population; we have more banded birds and the most-productive nests because of the nest-watch program," Silver said. "The reason they've survived is because of human interaction. We won't be doing it if

we're off the list (because funding would shrink)," Silver said.

Federal officials don't entirely disagree.

The Bureau of Reclamation and other agencies have questioned whether eagle activities can be funded at current levels if the bird is delisted.

Jeff Humphreys, a U. S. Fish and Wildlife biologist in Arizona, said, "We'll have to be very aggressive to keep people at the table with their pocketbooks open. The work is done on the cheap, but it's not cheap."

According to Tom Gatz, assistant supervisor for northern Arizona at Fish and Wildlife, budget is a major factor for ensuring the eagles' progress during the monitoring period. It becomes a matter of choosing priorities for limited funds, based on which animals are in the most trouble.

"Bald eagles are off the hook, but we have a responsibility to recover other species," Gatz said.

Some of Arizona's big fish, the razorback, spokedace and bony-tail chub, are in critical danger, but they don't get as much attention as the eagle, he said, suggesting that funds would instead be aimed at those species.

Gatz said his agency will continue to work on closures and monitoring. "Some level of nest-watching will continue, depending on funding," he said. "I anticipate, once it's delisted, we probably will have some nests fail. We may have to beef up some of the protections in Arizona." Arizona is not among the 31 states that have endangered-species laws.

Growth too rapid?

A scientist who conducted some of the initial studies on the Arizona bald eagle in the 1970s has a jolting take on Arizona's eagle.

Robert D. Ohmart, a biology professor at ASU East who teaches ornithology and conservation biology, said evidence suggests that the growing eagle population in Arizona is no comeback.

Ohmart, who worked on eagle studies for the Bureau of Reclamation and the Forest Service for eight years, suspects it is a recent population.

He dug through the existing literature by Arizona naturalists for

the past century and discovered a striking absence of references to eagles.

"The citations in the literature are few," Ohmart said. "There were significant scientists in Arizona from the 1900s on. I'm damned sure they weren't here. We're not talking about missing a dinky little sparrow. You can't believe people wouldn't see a bald eagle."

He fears the current group is inbred, subject to birth defects, because the population growth has been so rapid.

Ohmart would rather the eagles didn't fall off the list.

"Our population has enough troubles without delisting them," he said. "The way we have screwed up the environment with building dams and introducing non-native fish like carp and catfish. We've aided and abetted the bald eagle by giving it a large food supply here. With reservoirs we created stock tanks, a reliable food supply. There's some justification for delisting them, but with all the problems, people still need to look out for them."

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Reach the reporter at (602) 444-6863.

Caption:

A bald eagle
flies over its
nest recently
near Lake
Pleasant. The
species may be
removed from
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list.

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