



Marana seeks public input on habitat conservation

Eric Beidel July 11, 2007

Since 2002, Marana has worked on a plan to protect habitats for endangered species while allowing developers to avoid liability for any harm that comes to the animals as a result of development.

The give-and-take scenario would allow developers to build in certain habitats in exchange for setting aside open space and adhering to other requirements the town includes in its Habitat Conservation Plan.

If all goes according to plan, the town would receive an "incidental take permit" from the federal government. "Take" means shooting, killing, trapping, capturing or in any way harming

an animal.

By establishing other conservation measures, the Section 10 permit allows the town to "take" endangered species during capital improvement projects and other development.

The town hopes to have a final draft of the HCP by May 2009.

Staff completed a previous draft in 2004 covering six species, including the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl, since removed from the federal government's endangered species list.

The town has commissioned two groups to hash out aspects of the plan.

The technical biology team includes representatives from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Sky Island Alliance and Arizona Game and Fish.

The "stakeholders" group includes developers and environmentalists.

The biology team has focused its efforts on 13 species, seven more than addressed in the 2004 draft plan, including the pygmy owl, which could again be recognized as an endangered species.

Environmentalists petitioned the USFWS in April to re-list the bird, which weighs as much as

a tennis ball.

Recent studies have shown that the owl's numbers in Arizona have dropped significantly.

Authorities found just one pygmy owl in the Northwest last year.

"Some would say that there's no pygmy owls in the Northwest anymore, so there's no point," USFWS biologist Scott Richardson said about conservation measures.

"I differ. But we need to struggle with whether we just want to go with some development guidelines or pursue something larger," he told fellow biology team members during a meeting last week.

Marana can adopt an HCP because it has one species considered endangered — the lesser long-nosed bat.

The biology team last week discussed anchoring the HCP to the bat this time, as opposed to the owl in 2004's HCP draft. The group ultimately decided it will give each of the 13 species equal time.

The team passes on its thoughts and ideas to the stakeholders for consideration.

"What we want to forward to (the stakeholders) is, 'Hey, we still think the pygmy owl is important,'" Richardson said.

About half of Marana is in the state's hands, much of it in the Tortolita Fan.

Officials have talked about establishing a 16,200-acre preserve in the Fan for the owl. The land is owned by the state, from which Marana currently leases a smaller 2,400-acre preserve.

"State land is still the biggest question mark," Marana Environmental Engineering Manager Jennifer Christelman said. "As it sells off, we need to know if it's an area to be developed or set aside."

The group also has discussed putting restrictions on developers by allowing just 20-percent disturbance in exchange for building in critical habitat. Developers would have to pay an impact fee if they want to disturb more under this scenario.

The town could use the money from fees to fund efforts to buy open space, research and telemetry for any of the targeted animals.

"(HCPs) can be very effective planning tools," Defenders of Wildlife Southwest Representative Matt Clark said. "It's something that lays out the biological bottom line and that's something that's probably long overdue in Marana because it's been growing so much. So it's a very important step."

The town received a match-grant from AGF, which put up \$110,000 for the HCP study. Marana will pay \$150,000 for the grant. The town will continue to seek additional funding for the project, Christelman said.

Christelman said she looks forward to hearing from citizens about the proposed HCP.

The town plans to have a second draft completed by October, a third by December and the whole thing completed by May 2009.

The town held a public meeting on the matter on July 9. Two more follow, on July 11 and July 24. Both meetings will begin at 6 p.m. on the second floor of the Marana Municipal Complex.

Go online to www.marana.com/hcp for more information.

<http://explorernews.com/article/show/19372>