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By ALGIS J. LAUKAITIS / Lincoln Journal Star JournalStar.com | Posted: Wednesday, April 7, 2010 9:30 pm | (28) Comments

Salt Creek tiger beetle in the saline wetlands near Little Salt Creek. (LJS file)

Nearly 2,000 acres between Lincoln and Ceresco will be **designated critical habitat** for the Salt Creek tiger beetle, one of the rarest insects in the world.

The critical habitat designation was announced by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a "final rule" published Tuesday in the Federal Register.

The rule, which has been developed and scrutinized for more than two years, takes effect May 6. It identifies 1,933 acres in northern Lancaster and southern Saunders counties as key land areas containing features essential for the conservation, management and protection of the insect.

But on the same day, The Xerces Society, a nonprofit group dedicated to conserving invertebrates, said the 1,933 acres is insufficient for recovery of the beetle.

"This critical habitat proposal does not follow the best science or the law and is woefully inadequate to protect or recover this species," Xerces Executive Director Scott Hoffman Black said in a news release.

In 2005, a multiagency team of scientists proposed more than 36,000 acres of critical habitat for the tiger beetle. It then was asked by the USFWS to reduce the acreage. The team did so and came up with 15,000 acres, which it said was the bare minimum needed for recovery of the insect.

The long-legged, olive-green patterned Salt Creek tiger beetle was listed as a federal endangered species in 2005. By then, more than 90 percent of its salt marsh habitat had been destroyed or degraded because of encroaching development and farming.

The Salt Creek tiger beetle population has dwindled from a high of 777 in 2000 to 263 in 2008. Last year's numbers were about the same, said Leon Higley, an entomology professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who has studied the tiger beetle for years.

"It's not a decision that makes a lot of sense from a scientific standpoint," he said of the 1,933 acres. "It certainly fits if you want to try to essentially limit the recovery of a species."

Higley blames politics in Washington, specifically Bush administration officials who vigorously opposed enforcement of the Endangered Species Act.

"When you have a scientific panel make a recommendation and when you have a federal agency reduce the recommendation by 90 percent, I don't see how you can interpret it as anything other than politics," he said.

Higley said the designation limits the potential for scientists to restore the species to areas where it originally was found. He did credit the federal agency for designating the most important habitat for the tiger beetle.

"Well, the only thing I can say is the USFWS used the best available science that we had to identify the acres that were in the final rule," said Bob Harms, a biologist in the agency's Grand Island office. He said the agency is working on a recovery plan for the species.

Asked what critical habitat designation means to a landowner who wants to develop some of those acres, Harms said the designation kicks in only when some type of federal activity or money is associated with a project, such as building a bridge or dam or filling in a wetland.

More than half of the designated critical habitat is already owned by some type of conservation agency, said Tom Malmstrom, natural resources coordinator for the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department.

The city of Lincoln is a member of the Saline Wetlands Conservation Partnership that has been acquiring land between Lincoln and Ceresco since 2003. Other members are the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District, the Nature Conservancy, Lancaster County and the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

So far, Malmstrom said, the partnership has bought or obtained easements on more than 2,000 acres where saline wetlands are present, in large and small tracts.

He said the goal is not specifically to save the tiger beetle but to help conserve some of the remaining saline wetland areas surrounding Lincoln.

"Less than 20 percent of the original habitat area is left," he said.

Higley said the state, the city, conservation groups and landowners have been "quite cooperative" in setting land aside for protection. What he has found disappointing is that current laws do not offer enough protection to stop development in flood-prone areas, where tiger beetles can live.

Of the 1,933 acres designated as critical habitat, 714 are owned by the state and 1,219 by the city, the NRD and private landowners, according to the USFWS.

Higley said he and other researchers will continue to expand a captive-breeding program of the tiger beetle at the Lincoln Children's Zoo. So far, they've had limited success.

"We can rear them but we are trying to increase survival rates," he said.

The goal is to introduce the zoo-bred tiger beetles back into saline wetland areas in about four years, Higley said.

He said it would take 5,000 to 10,000 insects to have a stable population.

However, he said, it's more important to have the population dispersed instead of concentrated in one area, as it is now. That way they could survive a catastrophe.

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