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CONSERVATION GROUPS MOVE TO PROTECT THREE OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST'S RAREST BUTTERFLIES

Notice of lawsuit intended to spur government into action

PORTLAND, OREGON - A coalition of scientific and conservation organizations today notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that a lawsuit will be filed in 60 days to compel it to protect the Taylor's checkerspot, Mardon skipper, and island marble butterflies. In December 2002, the coalition submitted petitions to list the butterflies as federal endangered species. Under the Endangered Species Act, the Service has twelve months to determine whether protection is warranted. The Service declined to take any action on the petition.

"It's been over a year since we presented definitive scientific evidence that the butterflies are rapidly heading toward extinction and require federal protection," said Scott Hoffman Black, Executive Director of the Xerces Society. "Instead of action, we've seen only delays and excuses."

Despite court orders to the contrary, the Service stated that the Taylor's checkerspot and Mardon skipper are precluded from listing as threatened or endangered species because they have Candidate status. According to the Service, these butterflies are endangered and deserve federal protection, but protection is precluded by other, unspecified listing actions. Candidate status provides no legal protection for endangered wildlife and does nothing to promote their recovery.

"Placing a species on the internal candidate list is often a 'black hole,' where no further action occurs," said Kieran Suckling, Executive Director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "Species linger on the internal candidate list for years, until someone sues for compliance of mandatory deadlines, or the species becomes extinct."

The Mardon skipper occurs in four small geographically isolated populations in south Puget Sound, southern Washington Cascades, southern Oregon Cascades, and coastal northern California. It has been recently extirpated from four of eight sites in south Puget Sound, and from one site in the south Washington Cascades. The Taylor's checkerspot only occurs in twelve populations in south Puget Sound and Oregon's Willamette Valley, all but three of which contain fewer than fifty individuals. The island marble is found only on San Juan Island, Washington.

"In Washington, only about 3 percent of the butterflies' prairie habitat remains and it is threatened by development, pesticides, invasive plants, grazing, and other factors," said Dave Werntz, Science Director at Northwest Ecosystem Alliance. "Protection for the butterflies will prevent additional habitat destruction on state and federal lands and initiate recovery efforts."

The petitioners include the Xerces Society, Northwest Ecosystem Alliance, Center for Biological Diversity, Gifford Pinchot Task Force, The Northwest Environmental Defense Center, Friends of the San Juans, and the Oregon Natural Resources Council.