



State wants to relocate fuzzy little fishers in hopes of building population

By Dylan Darling
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State scientists plan to trap a secretive little mammal slinking through north state woods and relocate 40 Pacific fishers onto timberland in the southern Cascades and northern Sierra.

"We wouldn't be taking them all from one place," said Richard Callas, senior environmental scientist with the state Department of Fish and Game in Yreka.

Scientists would likely trap the fishers, a house cat-sized cousin of otters and martens, in Shasta, Siskiyou, Trinity and Humboldt counties over three years starting in the fall. They'd then put radio collars on them and track them as they roam across 160,000 acres of Sierra Pacific Industries land. Timber harvests will continue on the land, which has been established as fisher habitat for 20 years through a conservation agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said Mark Pawlicki, Sierra Pacific spokesman.

"The main thing is we have provided the habitat that we think is essential for fishers to survive," he said.

While most marketable timber is hauled from the land, trees with cavities for fisher dens - mostly black oaks - are left behind, Pawlicki said.

But critics of Sierra Pacific's timber practices also are critical of the fisher relocation plan.

Calling the Anderson-based company the state's "largest forest destroyer," Josh Buswell, Sierra campaign organizer for ForestEthics, said the plan to relocate fishers to Sierra Pacific land should be scrapped.

"You would be hard pressed to find a worse caretaker for these transplanted species," said Buswell, whose nonprofit environmental group has offices in San Francisco, Bellingham, Wash., and Canada.

He compared the plan to releasing wild California sea otters in the waters of the Port of Oakland and hoping they find seaweed.

Scientists studying the fisher said the planned relocation is an attempt to bridge a gap between the state's two populations of the animal, which preys primarily on small and medium-sized mammals, including rabbits, porcupines, squirrels and voles.

The fisher is important because it helps regulate those populations, which, if left alone, can become destructive.

There are an estimated 1,000 to 3,000 of the animals in Northern California, said Scott Yaeger, a wildlife biologist in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Yreka office. The other population numbers only about 350 and is south of Yosemite National Park.

The hope is that relocating fishers to the Sierra Pacific land in between will reconnect the animals.

A candidate for the federal Endangered Species Act protection since 2004, the fisher is still recovering from trapping and habitat loss to logging in the past two centuries, he said.

"The fisher has just not rebounded like we thought," Yaeger said.

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