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Blue butterfly's status to be reviewed further

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What it will take to save the Mount Charleston blue butterfly from threatened extinction won't likely be known until next year.

After some work this year to protect the butterfly's habitat -- the butterfly exists on only about 50 acres or so high up on the Lee Canyon side of the mountain -- federal agencies are doing a more extensive study to determine what else may need to be done.

The Urban Wildlands Group, a Los Angeles-based environmental group, in October filed an emergency petition asking the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to immediately stop habitat destruction on the mountain to preserve the species.

The half-inch-long butterfly is found on U.S. Forest Service land in the Spring Mountains National Recreation Area. Some of its habitat includes meadows in which the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort was working to repair ski lifts damaged by avalanches last winter.

Bob Williams, state director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said the ski resort's construction work, previously approved by the Forest Service, is continuing for now.

"The ground-disturbing activity had already occurred," Williams said.

However, the agencies are doing a review of the species' needs and additional proposed work. Williams said that although the ski resort itself is not in danger of being evicted from its concession, activities may be affected next year.

The federal agencies are surveying the habitat of the butterfly and essentially preparing for more detailed work next spring, when the insect comes out of its period of winter dormancy.

Williams said the Forest Service acted immediately to ensure that critical habitat would not be affected by the ski resort work. Both federal agencies, the Urban Wildlands Group and managers from the ski resort met to discuss conservation of the butterfly's host plants in the area, he said.

The Forest Service and managers at the ski resort did not return phone calls Wednesday.

Travis Longcore, Urban Wildlands Group science director, is tentatively satisfied with the response to the group's petition to take action.

"Now we wait and see what happens," Longcore said. "It sounds like there is a little more attention than there was before. ... We're really going to let it take its course now that it is set in motion."

Williams said some of the future work will involve protecting the host plants, such as the Torrey milkvetch, that provide sustenance for the butterfly.

"As soon as the snow is off next year, we'll be out there seeing if there are new plants," he said. "I'm not sure we're out of the woods yet, but certainly the efforts that the Forest Service took and (Deputy Forest

Supervisor) Stephanie Phillips took, are commendable."

Warm weather has delayed the opening of the ski resort, which usually comes in the second half of November.

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