

Reuters News

UPDATE 1-Rodents, not mining, caused damage to Nevada wildflowers, says govt agency

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Widespread damage to rare Nevada wildflowers in September was due to ground squirrels, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said on Friday, and not linked to human activity in the area, which includes a lithium mine being developed by Australia's ioneer Ltd.

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), a non-profit group, last month said conservationists discovered that "someone had dug up and destroyed" more than 17,000 Tiehm's buckwheat plants, a rare Nevada wildflower the Fish and Wildlife Service said this summer may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

"This appears to have been a premeditated, somewhat organized, large-scale operation aimed at wiping out one of the rarest plants on Earth," the CBD said at the time.

The CBD had sued U.S. regulators last year for granting ioneer permits to explore for lithium in the northern part of Nevada, arguing that the region where the company is operating is the main habitat for the flower. The environmental group pulled that suit last January after ioneer agreed to take additional measures to protect the plant.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said on Friday that environmental DNA analysis conducted on damaged roots of Tiehm's buckwheat, nearby soils and rodent scat strongly support that ground squirrels were responsible for the recent damage.

Current drought conditions likely motivated the rodents to seek moisture by consuming the shallow taproots of mature buckwheat plants, the report said.

The CBD said the report would not deter its ongoing efforts to add the flower to the list of protected species under the Environmental Species Act. A judge is expected to rule later this month on the CBD's request.

Adding the flower to the list would prohibit ioneer from mining lithium at that site, though the company would still have access to nearby acreage.

"Whether it was rodents or humans, Tiehm's buckwheat obviously is in dire need of protection, and we feel confident a judge will agree with that assessment," said Patrick Donnelly, the CBD's Nevada state director.

Ioneer said the company would continue to work to "ensure the protection and propagation of this species." (Reporting by Arathy S Nair in Bengaluru, additional reporting by Ernest Scheyder; Editing by Sriraj Kalluvila and Rosalba O'Brien)