

Urban Sprawl Chief Species Threat

NEW ORLEANS, La. — The nation's plant and animal life are facing an extinction crisis caused largely by the rapid encroachment of suburban communities into rural areas, a top official of the Department of Interior told the National Resource Management Planning Conference here recently.

"We're seeing a tremendous amount of agricultural land being covered over in concrete," said Sam Hamilton, acting southeastern regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, an agency of the Interior Department. Hamilton spoke at a conference session that focused on the importance of examining all federal regulations in developing a total resource management plan.

There are approximately 1,100 plant and animal species identified by the Fish and Wildlife Service as endangered or threatened, said Hamilton, adding that loss of habitat is the primary factor placing the species at risk. Approximately 80 percent of the natural habitat of threatened and endangered plants and animals is on private land.

"The future for these species depends upon how well we can

provide incentives for private landowners to do the right thing. We want to work with species before they get threatened," Hamilton said.

"We've turned the corner. I hope we've bottomed out in terms of adversarial relationships with landowners. In cases where we've been working with landowners and something happens that affects a species, we're not going to go back and ask the landowner to do more."

Areas where species are at greatest risk include Hawaii, south Texas, Florida, Appalachia, southern California and the Pacific Northwest. However, there are also some recent success stories, including the reintroduction of California condors and saving habitat for desert fish in Texas.

Hamilton said proposals to extend tax credits to landowners who protect wildlife habitat and estate tax reductions that would encourage families to retain farmland could enhance species protection. USDA programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) are also important tools in species preservation efforts, he said.

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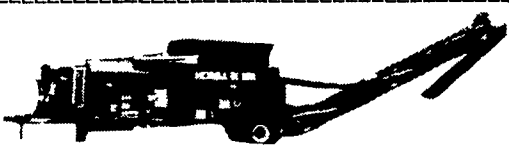
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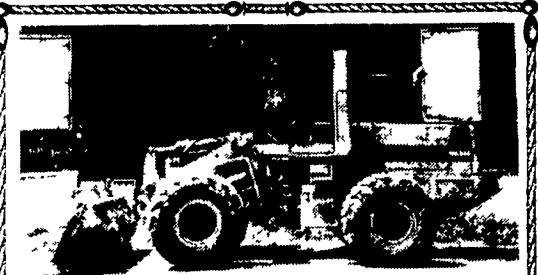
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