

Return to the [referring page](#).

Photo: [Blue butterflies](#)

Las Vegas SUN

Today: October 31, 2005 at 8:55:42 PST

Conservationists hope plan to protect blue butterfly takes flight

By Launce Rake <lrake@lasvegassun.com>

Las Vegas Sun

A California environmental group is asking federal agencies to move immediately to stop habitat destruction affecting a tiny blue butterfly in the Spring Mountains.

The Mount Charleston blue butterfly, a denizen of what scientists estimate could be fewer than 50 acres at high elevations, is one of 79 animals and plants that are covered by an agreement between Clark County and the federal government that allows Southern Nevada development to go forward without lengthy environmental approval processes.

Some conservationists suggest that the problems for the butterfly indicate that the "multi-species habitat conservation plan" may not be working.

Problems with the plan could be an obstacle for developers because they could lead to a court challenge, although conservationists and federal officials say that is a long way from imminent. The habitat plan gives developers the right to build while paying a \$550-per-acre fee to Clark County; that money is supposed to be used for habitat enhancement or mitigation.

The emergency petition by The Urban Wildlands Group, from Los Angeles, asks the U.S. Fish and Wildlife to list the butterfly as "endangered," a move that would restrict development on private and public land that could affect the insect's habitat.

The butterfly, which lives only on small islands of meadow on Mount Charleston, is a subspecies of the Shasta blue butterfly, which can be found throughout much of the American West.

"Threats to those populations from activities carried out or permitted by the U.S. Forest Service now place the entire known distribution of the Mount Charleston blue butterfly at risk for extinction," said Travis Longcore, an instructor at the University of California, Los Angeles and Urban Wildlands' science director.

The agreement in Clark County to protect habitat for the butterfly and other at-risk species "maintains that all populations are protected and no net unmitigated losses of

habitat would occur," Longcore said in the petition dated Oct. 20.

But the Forest Service has failed to mitigate loss of habitat on the mountain, he said.

"These Forest Service actions illustrate that the MSHCP (habitat plan) is not effective in protecting the Mount Charleston blue butterfly," Longcore said in his petition.

In a telephone interview, Longcore said federal agencies need to act now to save the Mount Charleston blue butterfly. Other species of butterflies also could be at risk to development, Longcore said.

"Someone at some federal agency is asleep at the switch," Longcore said. "The things that are in place to prevent the extinction of this species are not working. There is something fundamentally wrong."

The Mount Charleston blue butterfly has an advantage over other at-risk species in Southern Nevada because it is only found on federal land, he said. Thus, the federal agencies could have easily prevented destruction of habitat.

Although the land is federal, it is being used by the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort, which has the concession, or federal license, to operate the resort on top of Mount Charleston. Habitat needed for the butterfly is being affected now by construction, he said.

The good news for the butterfly is that because it is public land, federal agencies can probably respond quickly to prevent further habitat degradation, Longcore said.

Bob Williams, state director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, agreed with some of Longcore's points.

"In that it is an emergency, we will ask for action to be taken sooner rather than later ... In this case we will be meeting as soon as we can with the Forest Service to see if there's something we can do to maybe head off the listing (as an endangered species).

"We have an immediate need to look at what is going on on Mount Charleston."

Williams said the issues affecting the butterfly could affect the habitat conservation plan, which for five years has provided a legal framework that has allowed developers to continue to build without seeking potentially lengthy federal approvals for projects affecting any of nearly 80 local species.

"In some ways, it is a message to the Fish and Wildlife Service that the multi-species habitat conservation plan is not working, that we have to do a better job," Williams said. "We have to identify problems and identify problems quicker. We're not focused on the right things right now."

Jane Feldman, an activist with the local arm of the Sierra Club, said the butterfly issue is an indicator there are problems with the plan, which she helped draft in meetings that date back nearly a decade.

"We're trying to do too much, for God's sake," she said. "We don't really have good species habitat reports, and some of these species are in extremely limited ranges. Two dozen species are limited to specific elevations on Mount Charleston.

"Thank goodness someone is out there looking over our shoulders."

Marci Henson, Clark County's administrator for the habitat plan, said the county is aware of the petition and is following the issue closely.

"We are disappointed in the petition's assertion that the U.S. Forest Service's actions illustrate the Clark County Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSHCP) is not effective in protecting the Mt. Charleston blue butterfly," she said in a written statement. "We believe it is premature to assume that the agreement has not provided adequate protection for the butterfly and we look forward to learning more about the butterfly and the Forest Service's conservation efforts during the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's review of the petition."

Terry Murphy, a government consultant who helped draft the plan while working for Clark County, said it has fulfilled two goals: protecting habitat while allowing development on private land.

She said the plan provides a framework for a response to a petition such as the one filed last week.

"We have a responsibility to investigate that claim and use whatever mechanisms that are there in the plan, or the Endangered Species Act, to resolve the issue," Murphy said. "That's something that should happen around a table, not a courtroom."

Tim Short, U.S. Forest Service district ranger, said his agency has worked closely with the ski resort to ensure that habitat has been protected.

"We developed, worked closely with them to develop mitigation measures to accomplish that goal," he said. "Actions included seeding, reseeding with native plant species, included avoiding disturbances where we could, included monitoring efforts.

"Other mitigations with projects planned up there include trail relocation to try to re-establish sensitive habitat, and then trying to get the horses off of the slopes," Short said, referring to the mountain's wild horses. "That's going to be an ongoing challenge."

Short said the county-federal habitat plan, which is considered a model for other regions around the nation, has provided funding for restoration of springs and other environmental work.

"We're monitoring our biodiversity hot spots. There is a significant amount of work being done on habitat restoration, monitoring and research. Our aim is to preserve, or conserve I should say, these species and ensure their viability in the future ... and at the same time, accommodate the recreational uses on the mountain."

The Forest Service is responding to the petition, he said.

"We're in the process of assessing the situation as we speak."

Short said some construction is happening at the ski resort, and the work has Forest Service approval. The work includes fixing the ski lift damaged by last winter's heavy snow and avalanches, he said.

Brian Strait, general manager of the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort, said he was aware of the Mount Charleston blue butterfly, but said comment should come from the federal land managers.

"It's tough for me to really comment on a letter directed to the Forest Service," Strait said.

Short said some research that was called for in the approvals for the ski resort work "may not have occurred." Surveys that were required in the federal approvals involve "almost an esoteric arena of science."

"We're doing our best to move forward and close that gap so we understand what needs to be researched out there and what needs to be surveyed."

Launce Rake can be reached at 259-4127 or at lrake@lasvegassun.com.

Return to the [referring page](#).

Photo: [Blue butterflies](#)

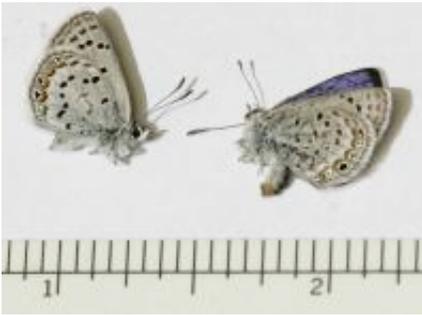
[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

Questions or problems? [Click here](#).

All contents copyright 2005 Las Vegas SUN, Inc.

Las Vegas SUN

Today: October 31, 2005 at 8:55:42 PST



SOME fear that Mount Charleston blue butterflies, shown here above a scale that is in inches, are being adversely affected by development in the area.

[Steve Marcus](#) / LAS VEGAS SUN

[Las Vegas SUN main page](#)

Questions or problems? [Click here.](#)

All contents copyright Las Vegas SUN, Inc.