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ALBUQUERQUE — The Center for Biological Diversity filed a formal notice June 4 of its intent to sue the U.S. Forest Service for failing to protect riparian areas in New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains from cattle. The area is critical habitat for the endangered New Mexico meadow jumping mouse.

"These mice represent the health of the upper elevation meadows and streams. It's immoral and illegal for the Forest Service to continue allowing cattle to decimate the area and cause a local extinction," Robin Silver, co-founder of the Center for Biological Diversity, stated. "If these tiny creatures become extinct, Forest Service officials will be responsible. We won't stop fighting until these animals are given the protections the law says they deserve."

The early June notice lists multiple ways that the Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are violating the Endangered Species Act — most recently, by concluding in a biological opinion that allowing cattle to graze in the jumping mouse habitat in the Lincoln National Forest would not harm the rodents.

The Center contends that agencies are failing to keep the cattle from trampling riparian areas and devouring grasses that the dwindling numbers of jumping mice need to survive. The area is part of a sky-island rising a mile above vast deserts of southern New Mexico.

The New Mexico meadow jumping mouse was listed as endangered in 2014, and the U.S. Fish

Lawsuit launched to protect endangered mouse, riparian areas in New Mexico's Sacramento Mountains

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and Wildlife Service protected nearly 14,000 acres of critical habitat for the animals in 2016. The tiny mouse only lives along streams. It was once found from southern Colorado to central New Mexico and eastern Arizona, but has been lost from most of its range because of loss and degradation of streamside habitat.

The New Mexico meadow jumping mouse hibernates for up to nine months a year, leaving a narrow window each summer to mate, reproduce and gain enough weight to survive its long hibernation. The mouse has highly specialized habitat needs, such as tall, dense grasses and forbs found only in riparian areas along perennial flowing streams.

Cattle concentrate in these riparian areas during the summer months, when the jumping mice are active. Their intensive grazing destroys the habitat and has resulted in isolated, fragmented populations that are highly vulnerable to occasional, yet inevitable, events such as wildfires and flooding.

"The Forest Service needs to do its job and protect these fragile animals," Silver said.

"Taxpayers are already subsidizing cattle grazing on public lands, but they shouldn't be paying to destroy our upper elevation meadows and streams or to wipe out an entire species."

The Center is represented in the litigation by Eubanks and Associates, LLC.