

# Group sues over whitebark pine petition

By MEAD GRUVER - Associated Press writer | Posted: Friday, February 26, 2010 12:00 am |

CHEYENNE -- An environmental group has sued seeking federal protection for a high-elevation pine tree devastated in some places in the Rocky Mountains by beetle infestations and fungus.

The Natural Resources Defense Council petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in December 2008 to list the whitebark pine as endangered. An initial finding on the petition was due within 90 days.

That still hasn't happened, prompting Wednesday's federal lawsuit filed in Washington, D.C.

The council is "disappointed but not surprised" that Fish and Wildlife has yet to respond to the petition, Andrew Wetzler, a council attorney based in Chicago, said Thursday.

"The truth is that Fish and Wildlife often fails to meet these statutory deadlines," Wetzler said.

"Unfortunately that's left us with no other choice but to take them to court because the plight of the whitebark pine is so serious."

A Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman reached late Thursday said she didn't have enough information to comment.

Whitebark pines can be found in Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Washington, Oregon, California, Nevada and western Canada. They thrive in higher, colder and windier environments than other trees in the Rockies and can live more than 1,000 years.

Whitebark pines for a century have suffered from blister rust, a fungus from Europe. The trees also are vulnerable to beetles, which have killed millions of acres of forests across the Rockies in recent years.

Surveys of the Yellowstone region last year showed whitebark pine mortality as high as 70 percent.

"We think the federal government needs to evaluate this issue as quickly as possible," Wetzler said

Nuts from whitebark pine cones are an important food source for grizzly bears. Squirrels gather stashes of nuts and grizzlies raid the stashes.

The trees also help trap high-elevation snowfall, an important water source in the West.