

2. ENDANGERED SPECIES: Group seeks to protect Calif. pika from warming temps (08/21/2007)

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Allison Winter, *E&ENews PM* reporter

Environmentalists asked California officials today to protect a small mountain mammal whose range is shrinking due to warming temperatures.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed the petition under the California Endangered Species Act, which requires all state agencies to avoid actions that threaten the survival of listed species. The group said that if the animal is listed, it could push California to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions.

The petition seeks protection for the American pika -- a small, furry relative of the rabbit that makes its home on rocky mountain peaks throughout the western United States.

"The American pika is California's canary in the coal mine," said Shaye Wolf, a staff biologist with the group. "The pika is adapted to life in the cold and thrives on high-elevation mountain ranges in California. As global warming raises temperatures across California, American pikas are disappearing."

The pika can overheat and die at temperatures as low as 80 degrees. It typically avoids the heat by seeking cool, rocky crevices and remaining inactive during warm periods. But environmentalists say rising temperatures are shortening the time when pikas can gather food, changing plants in its habitat, reducing its insulating snowpack and causing some pikas to overheat.

Rising temperatures are reducing the pika's habitat, according to the group. Studies at Yosemite National Park found that pikas have moved more than 1,000 feet upslope in the past 90 years.

The petition is the Center for Biological Diversity's first attempt to protect a species from global climate change under the California state law. The group has also filed federal petitions to protect the polar bear and 12 penguin species. The California Fish and Game Commission has 90 days to make an initial finding.