

Feds sued over coral protection

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A nonprofit wildlife advocacy group will sue the federal government for not providing adequate protection for two species of coral found off the Florida Keys that recently were placed on the endangered species list.

The Center for Biological Diversity successfully lobbied the National Marine Fisheries Service to put staghorn and elkhorn coral on the list. That occurred in May 2006, engaging an Endangered Species Act requirement that the agency designate critical habitat for protected species within a year of the status going into effect.

Fisheries biologists have not done that yet, said Jennifer Moore, a research scientist for the marine agency. The Center for Biological Diversity on Thursday filed a notice of its intent to sue the government, the first step in filing a lawsuit.

"We are not happy about the delay," Moore said, but defended the time and effort her agency is giving the matter. "We are diligently working on a plan that provides the most protection for those species."

Congress emphasized the importance of critical habitat, recognizing that "the ultimate effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act will depend on the designation of critical habitat." Recent studies have shown that species with critical habitat are twice as likely to have improving population trends than species without it, said Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Critical habitat protection for corals means that if a government action would adversely affect coral habitat, including those activities that contribute to global warming, the government must take steps to avoid such impacts, Sakashita said.

"These species of coral cannot stand much more delay," Sakashita said.

The fisheries service also has not implemented rules to protect elkhorn and staghorn coral, such as regulations for researchers collecting coral for scientific and conservation purposes, or for dredge-and-fill projects like the two-year endeavor in the Key West Harbor.

The number of colonies — the building blocks of reef ecosystems throughout the Florida Keys and Caribbean for nearly 500,000 years — has declined 97 percent since the 1970s, researchers said. The Center for Biological Diversity requested the listing as a way to get the Bush administration to recognize the effects of global warming.

Global warming causes a rise in water temperature, which can make corals more susceptible to bleaching. That, in turn, can lower corals' immune and defense systems, making it more difficult to fight potentially fatal diseases such as white band and white pox.

"I hope that they are doing due diligence and asking the hard questions to address issues like pollution, runoff and global warming," said DeeVon Quirolo, director of the Key West-based Reef Relief. "I hope they are taking their time to address the larger challenging issues that are affecting coral."