

Salsa Verde

Commentary on green goings-on from deep in the heart of Texas.

[Endangering the Endangered in Texas?](#)

By [Asher Price](#) | Tuesday, August 28, 2007, 06:25 PM

An Arizona-based environmental group said yesterday it would sue the U.S. Department of the Interior for interfering in the protection of 55 endangered species in 28 states, including several in Texas.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a formal notice to sue the department. Among its complaints are that three tiny Central Texas endangered species — the Comal Springs dryopid beetle, the Comal Springs riffle beetle and the Peck's Cave amphipod — were not awarded enough critical habitat by the Fish and Wildlife Service. You can find photos [here](#).

Under the Endangered Species Act, critical habitat refers to specific areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species.

I wrote about these species last year, after the Arizona group pushed the Fish and Wildlife Service to get the species critical habitat in the first place. From that May 2006 story:

“The animals are tiny — the riffle beetle, according to a Fish & Wildlife press release, is ‘about as long as an uncooked spaghetti noodle is wide’ — but the consequences of the designation, expected by June, could be huge. The species could find celebrity, or scorn, akin to that of the often-mentioned, seldom-seen Barton Springs salamander.”

The riffle beetle was awarded 30.3 acres of critical habitat; the dryopid beetle, 39.5 acres; and the amphipod, 38.5 acres, much of it in the San Marcos area. Invertebrates are usually given about 1,000 acres, Kieran Suckling, policy director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said.

“These are some of the smallest critical habitat given to any species under the Endangered Species Act,” he said.

In April, a senior Bush administration official who [revised scientific reports to minimize protection of endangered species](#) resigned after criticism by the Interior Department's inspector general. Last month the Fish and Wildlife Service said it [would review decisions influenced by the official](#), Deputy Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks Julie MacDonald.

Critical habitat could have consequences for nearby developers, who would need to address the impact of their work on the habitat of the species.

It's worth noting that while the Center for Biological Diversity say the Central Texas animals were subject to MacDonald's heavy editing of scientists' recommendations, the Fish and Wildlife Service itself did not include the critical habitat designations for the species among those it decided to review.

An [April 2005 article in the journal BioScience](#) found that species with critical habitat designation for two or more years were more than twice as likely to grow in population as species without. (One of the co-authors was Suckling, the policy director of the Arizona environmental group.)

The beetles and the amphipod have been listed as endangered since 1997, but because of their size and because the dryopid beetle and the amphipod live below ground, their numbers are hard to determine.