



SEPTEMBER 10, 2004

Group sues U.S. government for protection of two plant species found only in U.S. Virgin Islands

**By Matt Probasco
The Associated Press**

CHARLOTTE AMALIE, U.S. Virgin Islands — An environmental group is suing the U.S. government to have two plant species found only in the U.S. Virgin Islands placed under federal protection, officials said Thursday.

Fewer than 50 specimens of *Agave eggersiana*, an aloelike plant that grows up to 25 feet (8 meters) tall and has small pink flowers, are left in the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix, said Peter Galvin, a spokesman for the Tucson, Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity. Fewer than 200 specimens of *Solanum conocarpum*, a bushy plant with small purple and yellow flowers, remain on the island of St. John, he said.

In the lawsuit filed last week in Atlanta, the center argued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service violated the law by taking more than eight years to decide whether the plants should be federally protected. U.S. law says the process should take no longer than a year, with few exceptions.

Poor funding has resulted in a huge backlog of requests to add species to protection lists, said Tom MacKenzie, spokesman for the

Fish and Wildlife Service's Atlanta office, which oversees the southeastern United States and the U.S. Caribbean territories.

MacKenzie said the agency spends more resources on lawsuits than getting species on lists. But he acknowledged that suing the agency was often the only way for environmental groups to get species off the backlog.

The U.S. Virgin Islands National Park in St. John asked the Fish and Wildlife Service to place both plants on the endangered species list in 1996, said Rafe Boulon, chief resource manager for the park.

"I can't believe it's been that long," he said. "They're quite endangered because they aren't found anywhere else."

Galvin said the plants are so endangered that a hurricane could wipe them out. Stray goats and donkeys could also eat them into extinction, he said.