

Group Sites Climate Change in Fight for Frog Protections

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Environmentalists are suing the federal government over protections for a threatened frog found only in New Mexico, Arizona and a small part of Mexico, arguing that the amphibian is just one of many species facing increasing pressures due to climate change.

Once found at hundreds of moist sites across the Southwest, the Chiricahua leopard frog has disappeared from more than 80 percent of its range as a result of disease, nonnative predators, habitat loss and climate change.

“The frog is just so imperiled,” said Nicole Rosmarino, wildlife program director for the conservation group WildEarth Guardians. “It really needs to be provided with every tool in the toolbox and a very important tool is critical habitat.”

WildEarth Guardians filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in federal court in Arizona on Thursday, accusing the agency of failing to designate critical habitat for the frog despite listing it as threatened under the Endangered Species Act nearly six years ago.

Fish and Wildlife spokeswoman Elizabeth Slown said Friday she had not seen the complaint but that the agency, under the Endangered Species Act, is allowed to list a species without designating habitat.

Slown added that the frog can be found living around stock tanks and that the agency has received help from private landowners who don't mind the frog's presence. She said those landowners probably would not be as receptive if their tanks became critical habitat.

Like the frog, many animals and plants on the endangered species list and those that are candidates for protection are at risk because their natural habitats are changing — or in some cases disappearing.

Threats usually range from development to the invasion of nonnative species. But environmentalists say species are having an even harder time reproducing and finding shelter and food with the added stress of climate change — extended droughts, warmer temperatures and the melting of Arctic sea ice.

Shaye Wolf, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the effects of climate change can be seen along the nation's coastlines, atop its mountains and in the Arctic ecosystem — home to the polar bear.

“When you're talking about endangered and threatened species they don't have much resilience,” Wolf said. “They're often isolated and they have small numbers so any extra stressor is really going to push them over the edge.”

The Center for Biological Diversity and WildEarth Guardians currently have pending petitions with the Fish and Wildlife Service seeking protection for hundreds of species, including the polar bear, the American pika, the slender oak tree, the Sacramento Mountains checkerspot butterfly and a slew of snails and fish.

“You're going to find a climate change link for a lot of species,” Rosmarino said. “Nobody's going to be able to hide from it.”

The polar bear has been at the center of the debate, but the Fish and Wildlife Service has yet to make a decision. Director Dale Hall has said his agency has never declared a species threatened or endangered because of climate change and that it needs time to “do it right.”

Climate change may not have been such a big part of the debate a decade ago, but Slown said that has changed for the agency. “Climate change is a regular part of what biologists look at,” she said.

Jessica Ferrell, an attorney with the Seattle-based Marten Law Group, said she expects an increase in the use of climate change as an argument for species protection. That, she said, will likely put added public pressure on federal agencies to “take a hard look” at listing species based on the effects of climate change.