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Protection sought for Delta longfin smelt

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Tuesday that it will consider the Delta's longfin smelt population for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The longfin in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta last year hit a historic population low, mirroring the decline of other species, including the Delta smelt, which is already protected. The native longfin has a similar life cycle, but generally lives for two to three years, unlike the Delta smelt, which lives for only one year. The longfin also transits a larger range of fresh and salt water conditions.

A petition to list the species was filed with the service in August by the Bay Institute, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. In February, in response to another petition, the state Fish and Game Commission listed the longfin as a candidate for protection under the state Endangered Species Act. State candidacy allows regulators to adopt protections while the status of the species is reviewed. The commission did so by adopting Delta water export pumping restrictions similar to those already in place for Delta smelt.

The Fish and Wildlife Service decision today amounts to a ruling

that the petition provides sufficient evidence that the longfin species is in peril. The agency was nearly six months overdue on its legal requirement to rule on the petition, and the three environmental groups said they were close to filing a lawsuit to force action. The service now has until August to complete its review of the species.

"I hope they'll move forward quickly and make the changes in overall management of the system that are going to be necessary to sustain this species, as well as all the others that are in trouble," said Tina Swanson, a scientist at the Bay Institute.