

CLIMATE: Lawsuit seeks U.S. protection for pika

Allison Winter, E&ENews PM reporter

An environmental group signaled its intent today to sue the Bush administration in an effort to gain federal protection for a small mountain-dwelling mammal whose Western range is being shrunk by rising temperatures.



The Center for Biological Diversity said it its lawsuit would seek an Endangered Species Act listing for the American pika -- which resembles a hamster but

is related to rabbits and hares. The group's lawsuit notice follows a petition the group sent last October requesting protection for the pika; the administration hasn't responded to the petition.

The lawsuit is one of several attempts from environmentalists to use the Endangered Species Act to force government action on climate change. The center successfully petitioned for the listing of two coral species and has filed lawsuits aimed at adding polar bears and 12 penguin species to the list.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is expected to decide on the polar bear listing next week.

At issue in the pika lawsuit is the effect of climate change on Western mountain ranges.

The group maintains that climate change could eliminate the pika from large swaths of the West by the end of the century. More than a third of documented pika populations in the Great Basin mountains of Nevada and Oregon have already gone extinct, it says.

Pika can overheat and die at temperatures as low as 80 degrees. The species typically avoids the heat by seeking cool, rocky crevices and remaining inactive during warm periods. The group says rising temperatures are pushing pika further upslope and decreasing their habitat. Across mountains in the Great Basin of California, Nevada, Oregon and Utah, pikas have moved an average of 900 feet upslope in the past 100 years.