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State wildlife officials deny protection to pika

By Matt Weiser
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State wildlife officials rejected a bid Thursday to protect the American pika under the California Endangered Species Act, citing inadequate evidence that the rabbit relative is imperiled.

The fist-sized pika is the first species petitioned for protection under state law because of climate change.

It lives only on rocky slopes, generally above 8,000 feet in the Sierra Nevada. The Center for Biological Diversity had argued that global warming threatens to

shrink pika habitat into ever-smaller islands, and may eventually drive the species to extinction.

The pika also is vulnerable to heat; prolonged exposure to temperatures over 77 degrees may be fatal.

Research in the Great Basin documented a decline in pika

The American pika *Ochotona princeps*

- 6-8 inches in length, weighing about 6 ounces, no visible tail, round body, short legs, round ears, dense fur to conserve body heat.
- Lives above the treeline (8,000 feet and above) on rocky slopes, nesting in crevices and holes among rocks.
- Cannot tolerate temperatures above 77 F.
- Herbivore that eats grasses, sedges and shrubs.
- Does not hibernate, remains active under snow, using stored hay for food.

Photo by John C. Mosesso



populations in Nevada and Oregon as a result of warmer weather. But similar research hasn't been done in California.

The Department of Fish and Game evaluated the petition and found little evidence that the pika is declining in California. Meeting in Bodega Bay, the Fish and Game Commission rejected the petition in a 4-0 vote, with one member absent.

"It strikes me that this petition isn't so much about pika as it is about the effect of climate change on alpine wildlife," said Commissioner Michael Sutton. "This threat is better dealt with in a much more comprehensive way."

Commissioners were also puzzled about how the pika could benefit from a decision to list the species under the Endangered Species Act. If the threat is climate change, they wondered, how would the act help prevent the pika's extinction?

Shaye Wolf, a biologist at the Center for Biological Diversity, said listing would allow the state to limit livestock grazing and road building in pika habitat, which also threaten the species. It would also compel the state, and the Department of Fish and Game in particular, to move faster to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, she said.

The act, she said, "gives the department direction to protect

species from global warming as they would to any other threat. It does not discriminate among threats."

Wolf gave the commission an unpublished study by a doctoral candidate at Duke University showing that global warming will eliminate virtually all pika habitat in California by 2100, except for a relatively small patch in the Central Sierra near Yosemite National Park.

But Eric Loft, chief of the department's wildlife branch, said that study also failed to provide "on the ground" proof of a pika population decline in the Sierra.