

Feds to consider protecting New Mexico's state fish

By SUSAN MONTOYA BRYAN Associated Press Writer

Article Launched:05/13/2008 04:01:37 PM MDT

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—New Mexico's state fish, the Rio Grande cutthroat trout, has been designated as a candidate for possible protection under the federal Endangered Species Act as threats continue to mount against the fish and the cold water streams it calls home.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said Tuesday that federal biologists will develop a proposal to list the fish as either threatened or endangered. The process can take up to a year, and the agency is waiting for funding to begin the work.

Conservationists who have fought for years to have the fish listed said the announcement is a step in the right direction to protect a fish that has disappeared from about 90 percent of its historic range throughout the Rio Grande basin in New Mexico and Colorado.

"We're glad the Fish and Wildlife Service has finally agreed with us that the Rio Grande cutthroat trout needs protection," said Noah Greenwald, science director for the Center for Biological Diversity. "We first petitioned to have the trout protected in 1998 and we've filed three lawsuits to get here."

This is not the first time the agency has done such a review for the Rio Grande cutthroat. In 2002, it determined that listing the fish wasn't warranted because the trout was neither endangered nor likely to become endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

Since then, the number of secure populations has dropped from 13 to five and many of the other populations are isolated and occur in short stream segments. One concern is that disease, nonnative fish or events such as forest fires, droughts or floods could wipe out those isolated populations.

"It's really hard for a population to persist in the long term when they have such limited habitat to work with," Fish and Wildlife biologist Marilyn Myers said.

Another concern is how the trout's cold mountain streams will be affected by climate change. Myers pointed to research that shows an increase in the air temperature in the Southwest and increases in the temperature of many streams.

"If you look at the literature and what's predicted for climate change and its effect on cold water fish, it's very consistent in saying that cold water fish are going to be one of the first groups of animals to be affected," she said. "And since Rio Grande cutthroat trout are at the southern portion of the range for any cutthroat trout subspecies, it puts it certainly at greater risk."

Greenwald agreed, saying trout can serve as an indicator of the health of the Southwest's aquatic habitats.

"In Arizona and New Mexico, the native stream-dwelling fish and amphibians are almost universally declining and in trouble," he said. "The combination of water withdrawal, a warming climate and invasive species is just doing a huge amount of damage. In a sense, the Southwest is experiencing an extinction crisis in its rivers and streams."

Despite being added to the candidate list, the Rio Grande cutthroat won't have any statutory protection under the Endangered Species Act and there will be no changes to any fishing regulations. However, the Fish and Wildlife Service said the designation will provide a boost to conservation efforts already under way by federal agencies, states and other groups.

Myers said New Mexico and Colorado already are working to restore the Comanche and Placer watersheds to make them good homes for viable Rio Grande cutthroat populations.

The New Mexico Game and Fish Department and other groups also are part of a long-term project to restore the fish to about 125 miles of streams and 20 lakes in the subspecies' historic range in northern New Mexico.