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Enviro group: US must respond to coral concerns

The Associated Press

A U.S. conservation group announced Wednesday it would sue the federal government to force a decision on whether to protect 83 coral species it says are threatened by global warming and more acidic waters.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity has sent notification of its intention to sue the National Marine Fisheries Service because the U.S. agency missed a deadline for an endangered species listing decision for dozens of coral species. A 60-day notification letter is required before a suit can be filed.

Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, said the corals, found in Florida, Hawaii and island territories in the Caribbean (Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands) and Pacific, face a growing threat of extinction from rising ocean temperatures.

"Timing is of the essence to reverse the tragic decline of these vitally important reefs," Sakashita said. "We can't afford any delays in protecting corals under the Endangered Species Act."

Connie Barclay, a spokeswoman for the National Marine Fisheries Service, said Wednesday that agency scientists are working on the conservation group's petition to put 83 coral species on the endangered species list. They hope to publish their findings in the next two weeks.

Among the group's list of 83 species is the mountainous star coral, once considered the dominant reef building coral in the Atlantic, and the ivory tree coral, a branching coral found in the Caribbean whose delicate limbs provide shelter for numerous reef fish.

Sakashita said protection under the Endangered Species Act would create new conservation opportunities and provide for greater scrutiny of fishing, dredging and offshore oil development.

Reef-building coral is a fragile organism, a tiny polyp-like animal that builds a calcium-carbonate shell around itself and survives in a symbiotic relationship with types of algae — each providing sustenance to the other. Even a 1 degree Celsius (1.7 degree Fahrenheit) rise in normal maximum sea temperatures can disrupt that relationship.

Unusually warm waters in recent years has caused the animals that make up coral to expel the colorful algae they live with, creating a bleached color. If the problem persists, the coral itself dies — killing the environment where many fish and other marine organisms live.

Corals around the world are being stressed by rising sea temperatures. Carbon dioxide released by burning fossil fuels is absorbed by the oceans, making the waters more acidic and corrosive on corals. Land-based pollution, such as sewage, beach erosion, coastal development and overfishing also are to blame, experts say.

Also Wednesday, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced a new review for two rare U.S. Virgin Island plants, the agave *eggersiana* and *solanum conocarpum*, in response to a Center for Biological Diversity complaint challenging the agency's 2006 decision not to give them federal protection.