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## Environmental groups seek protection for another delta fish

*The Associated Press*

SACRAMENTO—The longfin smelt should be listed as an endangered species because its population has plummeted to record low numbers in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, according to petitions filed Wednesday by a coalition of environmental groups.

The Bay Institute, Center for Biological Diversity and Natural Resources Defense Council filed the requests with state and federal wildlife agencies.

“This was a fish that was once so abundant,” said Jeff Miller with the Center for Biological Diversity, based in Phoenix, Ariz. “Now, we’re looking at the whole estuary unraveling.”

The decline of the longfin smelt is just the latest sign of trouble in the largest estuary on the West Coast.

Populations of other species, including the threatened delta smelt, threadfin shad and striped

bass, also are in decline. All are considered indicators of the overall ecological health of the delta, which provides water for more than two-thirds of the state’s residents.

The population of the longfin smelt is 3 percent of the level measured less than 20 years ago, according to the petition. The silvery fish, which grows to about 5 inches long, is distinguished by its long pectoral fins.

Environmental groups blame excessive water pumping from delta, invasive species, pesticide runoff and destruction of habitat for the plummeting fish populations. They say the decline of other native fish, such as the Chinook salmon and steelhead trout, may not be far behind.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Fish and Game Commission have 90 days to act on the environmental groups’ petition. If either agency decides to move forward, a one-year study period would be launched before a decision is made, Miller said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service denied protection for the longfin smelt in 1993.

The petition also seeks protection for longfin smelt populations in other Northern California waterways. The environmental groups say the fish is nearing extinction in the Klamath and Russian river estuaries and appears to have disappeared from Humboldt Bay.

Longfin smelt also have been found from Coos Bay, Ore., to Prince William Sound in Alaska, according to the California Department of Fish and Game.