

Petitions say more Delta fish in trouble

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Another dwindling Delta population fish should be added to the list of endangered species, environmentalists contend in petitions filed Wednesday.

Longfin smelt, a cousin to the imperiled Delta smelt, are falling in numbers and could disappear from the Delta and San Francisco Bay, environmental groups said in asking state and federal regulators to protect the fish on an emergency basis.

Like Delta smelt, longfin smelt were once among the most abundant fish in the Delta and at one time supported a commercial fishery.

But their numbers have declined dramatically in recent years along with all the major fish of the Delta's open waters. Pumping water out of the Delta to supply California users, pollution from farm runoff and the invasion of exotic species are all likely to blame.

The precarious plight of Delta smelt already has caused water supply disruptions and pushed the Delta's ecological crisis into the realm of courts, so it's unclear what effect adding longfin smelt to the list of protected species would have, since many of their habitat requirements are similar.

And measures being taken to protect Delta smelt -- including a decision in June to shut off the state's largest water delivery system for nine days --also would likely benefit longfin smelt.

Still, longfin smelt benefit from larger flows of fresh water in the spring, a habitat requirement that has the potential to be very costly to water users who could be forced to release water from reservoirs that otherwise would be used for drinking and irrigation.

And environmentalists have been frustrated that attempts to address widespread ecological problems in the Delta have been intensely and narrowly focused on the Delta smelt. They say the problems are deeper than that.

"Delta smelt is not the only species in the system that is in trouble," said Tina Swanson, a senior scientist at the Bay Institute who made the scientific case for listing longfin smelt for protection under the state and federal endangered species laws.

"I think Delta smelt and longfin smelt are telling us the same thing. The reason that people pay attention to Delta smelt is because they were listed," Swanson said.

The petitions were filed Wednesday with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Fish and Game Commission by three environmental groups: the Bay Institute, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The regulatory agencies are supposed to decide within 90 days whether the petitions have merit, and if they do a decision on whether to designate the fish for protection under endangered species laws would be due a year from now.

Longfin smelt grow to about 4 inches and typically live two years. They eat plankton and tiny shrimp and, because they were once so abundant, might have been an important food source for other fish, birds and mammals.

Unlike Delta smelt, which are found only in the Delta, longfin smelt live in estuaries from the San Francisco Bay and Delta north to Prince William Sound, Alaska.

In the early 1990s, federal regulators rejected a similar petition from environmentalists because the longfin smelt were found in other estuaries.

But, Swanson argues that there is no evidence that Bay Area fish mingle with fish farther north, and therefore it could disappear from the Bay and Delta.

Protecting the two smelt species and other fish, including salmon, sturgeon and striped bass, will improve the overall health of the Delta, environmentalists contend.

Meanwhile, the latest population numbers for Delta smelt are showing that what appeared to be an alarming crash this spring, bringing the fish close to extinction, may have stabilized.

Summer figures turned up the same number of fish as were found last summer, though scientists say the Delta smelt population is so low their surveys are becoming unreliable.