

Another smelt in danger, group says

Salmon, bass may be next if longfin goes, some warn

By **Alex Breitler**

Record Staff Writer

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The Delta smelt's struggles run in the family.

Environmentalists on Wednesday asked the federal and state governments to list longfin smelt, a cousin of the now-notorious Delta smelt, as an endangered species.

Unlike the Delta smelt, the decline of which brought water export pumps near Tracy to a halt earlier this year, the longfin smelt is found in other estuaries as far north as Alaska.

But here in the Delta, both smelt species have dropped to record lows in recent years, and environmentalists say added protections are warranted. "It's another native species in this estuary that's in big trouble," said Tina Swanson, a biologist with the conservation group The Bay Institute. "This is just another indication that we've got really serious problems in this estuary and that the problems extend beyond the Delta."

Once-abundant longfin smelt have suffered from toxic pollution in the water, alien clams that gobble up their food and water diversions, including those from the pumps that send water to the Bay Area and Southern California, according to the petition by The Bay Institute, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The Delta is the southernmost estuary in which longfin smelt are found. They once occupied Humboldt Bay and the lower Klamath River, but now may be extinct in those locations.

Other more prominent species such as salmon and striped bass could be next if Delta and longfin smelt become extinct, environmentalists warn.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman Al Donner said the agency has 90 days to decide if there is enough information to consider listing the fish. If the answer is yes, then the agency has 12 months to make a final decision.

A similar petition was filed in 1993, but it was denied, Donner said. "We are heavily involved in a number of efforts to address the Delta," he said, efforts that may help the longfin smelt as well as the Delta smelt.