

Honolulu Star-Bulletin

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Native fly finally
gets protection

Scientists say some species of Hawaiian
picture-wing fly could help to reveal cures

Star-Bulletin staff

Twelve species of Hawaiian picture-wing flies will be classified as endangered in 2006, five years after scientists recommended they receive the federal protection.

In March a wildlife group sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, saying the agency had first proposed protection of the insects on Jan. 17, 2001. Under the Endangered Species Act, the government had one year to place them on the Endangered Species List.

Last month, a U.S. District Court judge in Portland, Ore., where the suit was filed, ordered the government to start protecting the species by April 2006 and its "critical habitats" by April 2007.

Recently scientists announced that some species of Hawaiian picture-wings could help unlock cures to autoimmune diseases such as AIDS, cancer or the West Nile virus.

"Hawaii's fantastic picture-wings were at the brink of extinction before scientists could even investigate their medicinal values, and it is our shared responsibility to ensure that these species survive," Brent Plater, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a press release.

"We owe it to future generations to protect these exceptionally important creatures, and the court's order recognizes that one of the most effective ways to do that is to protect the places the picture-wings call home."

A spokesman with the wildlife service could not be reached yesterday. But in 2001, after the insects were proposed for the endangered species list, the agency's regional director for the Pacific region said, "Hawaiian picture-wings have provided the scientific world and the general public with extraordinary knowledge about evolutionary biology."

Anne Badgley, who no longer heads the Pacific office, also said it is "distressing that these species are now in need of protection."

Hawaiian picture-wings are two to three times the size of a common housefly, and are distinguished by elaborate markings on their clear wings. They are found in native vegetation at cooler elevations of about 3,000 feet.

Half of the endangered insects are on Oahu, three species are on the Big Island and one species each is found on Kauai, Molokai and Maui.

The wildlife service has said the insects' biggest threats include feral animals, alien weeds, fire and biological pest control.