

Groups wait for word on worm

Government has until Jan. 5 to list the giant Palouse earthworm as endangered or case heads to court

By Devin Rokyta, Daily News staff writer

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The federal government has just one week to add the giant Palouse earthworm to the endangered species list or environmental groups will take the battle to the courts.

Noah Greenwald, a conservation biologist for the Center for Biological Diversity, said attorneys for a team of environmental groups - including the Palouse Prairie Foundation, the Palouse Audubon Society and Friends of the Clearwater - and three private citizens are at work preparing to file suit against the government in anticipation of its refusal to add the earthworm to the list by Jan. 5.

"Our attorney is working on that right now, so we should be pretty close," Greenwald said. "It's going to have to go through the courts since we haven't heard anything from Fish and Wildlife."

The environmental team filed a Freedom of Information Act request in October seeking any information from Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the earthworm and its previous denial of protection under the Endangered Species Act. Fish and Wildlife failed to respond within the allotted time period of 10 days, and the environmental groups filed a 60-day notice of intent to sue the agency.

The giant Palouse earthworm is the largest and longest-lived earthworm on the continent and can reach a length of three feet. It has a pinkish-white color and is reported to have a flowery smell. It lives in permanent burrows as deep as 15 feet and has been reported to spit at attackers to escape predators.

The earthworm's only known habitat is the grassland of the Palouse in west-central Idaho and southeastern Washington, much of which has been destroyed by agricultural development, invasive species and pesticides.

The earthworm was described as very abundant in 1897, but has not been sighted since May 2005. Before that, it had not been sighted since 1988.

Fish and Wildlife announced in October it had denied a request by the environmental groups to list the earthworm as endangered. The agency indicated information regarding the range, distribution, population size and status of the earthworm was too limited to add it to the endangered species list.

Greenwald said the lack of information on the earthworm should have been reason enough to add it to the list.

"For the Fish and Wildlife Service to deny protection for a species that has been seen such few times is just unbelievable," Greenwald said.

"It's just all too characteristic of how the agency has been approaching endangered species under this administration. The Fish and Wildlife Service added a single species in 21 months."

The petitioners argued that the threat of destruction and modification of habitat, disease and predation, inadequacy of regulatory mechanisms, and other natural and man-made factors make the earthworm a prime candidate for the endangered species list. But Fish and Wildlife said there was not enough data to conclude the potential threats discussed in the petition posed a risk to the existence of the species now or in the future.

Steve Paulson, a Friends of the Clearwater board member, said he has yet to hear from Fish and Wildlife or the federal government in response to the notification of intent to sue. The past two months have been spent mostly waiting.

"We are just waiting for the 60-day period to go by and if we don't see anything we will file a suit," he said.

Paulson said he does not see any potential developments arising that would stop the case from going to court.

"It's moved into the legal arena," he said.

Tom Buckley, external affairs representative for the Upper Columbia Fish and Wildlife Office in Spokane Valley, said Fish and Wildlife is still looking into protection for the earthworm and have been in contact with researchers at the University of Idaho about potential studies that could shed more light on the elusive creature.

"We are talking about it and talking with folks at the University of Idaho and seeing what the next step is," Buckley said.

Fish and Wildlife also is funding a \$22,500 survey protocol for developing techniques to safely locate the worm. The money also will help researchers learn more about the earthworm.

The service also is investigating the potential of acquiring money to develop a database on the biological diversity of the Palouse. The database would ensure data on native Palouse species, such as the giant Palouse earthworm, was consistent and thorough. It also would provide distribution maps and genetic information.

"It's not as if nothing is being done that wouldn't build our knowledge base about this worm," Buckley said. "I don't mean to sound like everything is pie in the sky, but we are working to get things done."

Buckley said it is difficult to know what the effect on Palouse-area residents would be if the earthworm was classified as endangered.

"Until we know more about the earthworm we can't answer that question," Buckley said. "Once we learn more about it we will be able to address those questions."

Greenwald said if the earthworm is listed it will be easier to raise awareness of the earthworm, which would result in the more money for studies and more protection of the animal's habitat.

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