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## U.S. agrees to consider protections for pikas

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by JANE KAY

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A furry relative of the rabbit that lives in the High Sierra is the first mammal outside of Alaska that the federal government has agreed to consider for protection from harmful effects of global warming.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, under settlement of a lawsuit, agreed Thursday to look into the status of the American pika, an obscure animal weighing one-third of a pound that emits squeaks heard by hikers in Yosemite National Park and elsewhere.

By May, the agency must complete its investigation, and decide if the animal deserves protection under the Endangered Species Act, which would result in strategies to raise its declining populations. The polar bear is the only mammal that has been put under the law because of threats from changing climate.

The pika is so sensitive to heat that it generally can't survive out of its mountain burrows if the temperature rises above 80 degrees, scientists say. Its situation is made more dire because only during the short mountain summers can it gather the 60 pounds of grasses and flowers it needs in storage to last through the winter, researchers say.

Surveys in the Great Basin show that more than one-third of the populations are disappearing, according to Erik Beever, a biologist with the U.S. Geological Survey. Out of 25 former populations found decades ago, only 16 could be located in a recent search. California populations that live at the lower elevations already are suffering from rising temperatures, scientists say.

Early naturalists recognized about three dozen subspecies of American pika, five of which inhabit California. They live at elevations as low as 5,000 to 9,000 feet in Modoc, Lassen and Siskiyou counties and the northern Sierra Nevada from Mount Shasta south to Donner Pass. The Mount Whitney pika's habitat in Tulare, Fresno and Inyo counties in the southern Sierra is as high as 8,500 to 13,000 feet in elevation.

"Pikas are intolerant to higher temperatures, and the scientists are finding that the lower-elevation populations are disappearing," said Shaye Wolf, a biologist on staff of the Center for Biological Diversity.

The environmental group brought the suit against the federal government in August to force consideration under the act.

The Center for Biological Diversity is switching half of its nationwide resources to San Francisco to open a Climate Law Institute, which will



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focus on addressing "the greatest environmental threat of our time," executive director Kieran Suckling said Thursday.

The center has \$6.3 million in seed money, and expects to raise \$17 million over the next five years, he said. Part of the funds come from the Sandler Family Foundation in San Francisco and the Los Angeles-based California Community Foundation. The center works to protect species in oceans, urban wildlands, public lands and internationally.

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