

Public comment period begins for rare flies

By Tara Godvin

Associated Press

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has opened the floor to public comment on a proposal to place 12 species of Hawaiian picture-wing flies on the endangered species list.

The comment period began yesterday and lasts for 30 days. The service said it is particularly interested in information about any threats to the rare flies, additional populations, and current or planned activities in the areas currently inhabited by the 12 species.

While there are about 600 known species of Hawaiian picture wings, the ones being considered for listing as endangered are each found on only one island and depend upon a single or just a few species of native plants to consummate their breeding cycles. Six of the species are found on Oahu, three buzz around the Big Island, and one each lives on Kauai, Molokai and Maui.

Yesterday's call for comments is actually a reopening of the comment period, one of the steps needed to put a species on the endangered species list.

When the 12 species of flies were first up for listing in 2001, the service received only two letters, said Ken Foote, a spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"So, we're really seeking additional information," he said.

Any facts provided by the public will be included in the development of the picture wings' recovery plan and the outlining of their critical habitat on the islands.

The process for putting the insects on the endangered species list failed to move ahead four years ago because of lack of funding and personnel, Foote said.

However, federal money was earmarked for the project after a district court judge in August ordered the government to begin protecting the species by April 2006 and its habitats by the following year.

Under the Endangered Species Act, the federal government must decide within a year of a proposal whether to place a species on the list.

The Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit in March charging the service with violating the act because years after the 2001 proposal was made, the process for listing the flies still hadn't moved ahead.

"It's great to see the process moving along again. These picture wings are very endangered. Some have already gone extinct," said Kieran Suckling, policy director of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Suckling said in study by his organization last year researchers found that about half of the species that have gone extinct in the nation since 1973 were native to Hawaii.

Of those extinct species, 90 percent weren't on the Endangered Species List. But species that were had a high survival rate, he said.

"Getting species on to the Endangered Species List is one of the most important things you can do to save them from extinction," he said.