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## Biologist: Sunfish should be listed as endangered

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— An Alabama biologist is trying to get a rare fish that may live near a Limestone County rock quarry deemed an endangered species so it can be protected.

“There’s still time to save the spring pygmy sunfish, but only if we act fast to protect its habitat from careless development and unsustainable agricultural practices,” said Mike Sandel with the Center for Biological Diversity and Fisheries.

Sandel petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Tuesday to list the spring pygmy sunfish as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act.

The fish had been living in Pryor Branch, located near Rogers Group rock quarry off U.S. 31 at Laughmiller Road in 2006 and 2007, according to Sandel. It was not located in Pryor Branch in 2008, according to Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director for the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland, Ore. The sunfish is currently limited to a small stretch of Beaverdam Creek in Limestone County east of Huntsville and is threatened by urban sprawl from metropolitan Huntsville, poor agricultural practices and streamside vegetation clearance, Sandel said.

“The spring pygmy sunfish is only found on one place on Earth,” Sandel said. “And that one place is severely threatened by urban sprawl, pollution and poor management.”

Some opponents of the quarry had asked the Alabama Department of Environmental Management to deny Rogers Group’s request for a permit to operate the quarry due, in part, to the rarity of the pygmy sunfish. However, ADEM granted the permit and the quarry has been operating since last year.

### Scrappy fish

Discovered in 1937, the sunfish was twice presumed extinct during the 70 years it has been known to science, he said. It is limited primarily to headwater springs and historically occurred in three small separated spring complexes — Cave Springs, Pryor Springs and Beaverdam Springs. These spring complexes are separated by up to 65 miles. Two of the three populations have disappeared. The Cave Springs population was extirpated in 1938 due to inundation by the formation of Pickwick Reservoir; the Pryor Springs population disappeared by the late 1960s, most likely due to dredging and chemical contamination but it was later reintroduced, Greenwald said. The only remaining native population occupies roughly five river miles within the Beaverdam Springs complex.

“Protection as an endangered species is the last hope for the spring pygmy sunfish,” Greenwald said. “The sunfish is one of a vast number of Alabama fish species in desperate need of federal protection.”

Alabama leads the nation in richness of aquatic diversity, including fish, mussels, snails, and turtles, among others. Unfortunately, much of this diversity is threatened by the destruction of streams and wetlands, Greenwald said. Leading scientists recognize 124 species of fish as being imperiled in Alabama and, of these, only 14 are protected under the Endangered Species Act, he said. The spring pygmy sunfish is one of the many species without protection that are barely clinging to life, he said.

For more information, go online to [www.biologicaldiversity.org](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org).