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## Spring pygmy sunfish in Limestone County may be in line for federal protection

By Steve Doyle

HUNTSVILLE, AL -- A rare, inch-long fish whose last known habitat is Limestone County's Beaverdam Creek may be in line for federal protection.

Last week, the Center for Biological Diversity in Portland, Ore., and University of Alabama graduate student Michael Sandel petitioned the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to declare the spring pygmy sunfish an endangered species.

Sandel, who studies sunfish as part of his doctoral research in aquatic biology, said it has been pushed to the brink of extinction by agricultural chemicals and mud washing into the creek from nearby farm fields.

"It's really not looking good for them," he said Tuesday. "The population may be in the thousands, but that's kind of misleading. They can disappear at the rate of thousands overnight because they are so sensitive" to changes in water quality.

Beaverdam Creek, its tributaries and wetlands should be off-limits to residential and industrial development, the petition argues, because it is "critical habitat" for the fish.

Last year, Volkswagen strongly considered building its first U.S.

automotive plant on 1,300 acres near Beaverdam Creek before choosing a site in Chattanooga. Much of the area has been annexed into Huntsville.

The 26-page petition says Huntsville's expansion into the Beaverdam Creek area will cause "rapid and widespread habitat disturbance, and an imminent threat of extinction" for the sunfish.

City Planning Director Dallas Fanning said the city will follow federal wildlife guidelines as new homes and businesses move to that area, located north of Interstate 565 and east of Greenbrier Road.

"We'll just factor it in," Fanning said Wednesday. "It's not anything that we haven't dealt with in the past."

Spring pygmy sunfish can survive only in the clear, cool water of spring-fed streams, Sandel said. They previously disappeared from Cave Spring in Lauderdale County and Pryor Branch near Calhoun Community College's Decatur campus.

He said Beaverdam Swamp, about three miles north of the original Greenbrier Restaurant, is one of the sunfish's last "strongholds."

Beaverdam Creek starts near Powell Road and flows south, passing under Old Highway 20 and I-565 before entering Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge.



The spring pygmy sunfish  
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Fish & Wildlife Service officials have up to a year to review the petition and decide whether the sunfish warrants federal protection, said Noah Greenwald, the Center for Biological Diversity's endangered species program director.

He contends the fish faces "imminent peril" from declining water quality in Beaverdam Creek, wells pumping groundwater away from the stream and encroaching development.

"The ball's in Fish & Wildlife's court," Greenwald said Tuesday. "A lot of times, we end up having to sue them to enforce the timelines of the Endangered Species Act. The (Bush) administration had a real clear ideological opposition to protecting endangered species."

Alabama has more federally endangered species -- 116 -- than every state but Hawaii and California. Native animals on the government's protected list include the gray bat, Perdido Key beach mouse, leatherback sea turtle and Florida panther.