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U.S. government agrees to consider federal protection for two rare plants in U.S. Virgin Islands

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CHARLOTTE AMALIE, U.S. Virgin Islands_The U.S. government agreed to rule on whether two plants species found only in the U.S. Virgin Islands should be placed under federal protection, settling a lawsuit Tuesday with an environmental group.

The Tucson, Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in September for taking more than five years to decide whether the plants should be protected, arguing the law requires them to make a decision within one year of an official request.

As part of the settlement reached in an Atlanta court, the government promised to rule on whether to protect the plants by February 28, 2006, said Ben Porritt, a spokesman for the U.S. Justice Department.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials have said that poor funding has resulted in a huge backlog of requests to add species to protection lists.

Fewer than 50 specimens of agave eggersiana, an aloe-like plant that grows up to 25 feet (8 meters) tall and has small pink flowers, are left in the U.S. Virgin Island of St. Croix, according to Center for Biological Diversity.

The center says fewer than 200 solanum conocarpum, a bushy plant with small purple and yellow flowers, remain on the island of St. John.

“Sadly, due to the inaction of the federal government, numerous species have gone extinct while awaiting protection under the Endangered Species Act,” said Peter Galvin, a spokesman for the center. “We hope this settlement will help ensure these plants do not suffer the same fate.”

The center has said the plants are so endangered that a hurricane could wipe them out. Stray goats and donkeys could also eat them into extinction.

Park officials have started removing stray goats and donkeys from the Virgin Islands National Park, which takes up two-thirds of St. John.