

Environmentalists plan petition drives, lawsuits over endangered species

Associated Press
Boulder Daily Camera

Posted:12/28/2009 03:49:16 PM MST

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — A group of environmentalists pledged Monday to file petitions and lawsuits over the next 36 days to persuade the Obama administration to make protection of endangered plants and animals a priority.

Listings under the Endangered Species Act have reached an all-time low, while the number of plants and animals that need protection is growing, said Nicole Rosmarino, the wildlife program director for WildEarth Guardians.

"It amounts to a lack of will. The Obama administration and Interior Secretary (Ken) Salazar simply don't consider endangered species protection a priority," she said.

Environmentalists accuse the Obama administration of lagging behind previous administrations in listing species under the act. The Bush administration, for example, averaged seven listings per year over its two terms.

By comparison, only three new U.S. species were listed in 2009, while the number of species proposed for protection and those waiting on the candidates' list stands at more than 330.

More than 1,300 U.S. species are currently listed as either threatened or endangered.

The Endangered Species Act, which was signed into law in 1973, has an excellent record in preventing extinction. Ninety-nine percent of the species protected by the act still exist today.

As part of a campaign marking the act's 36th anniversary Monday, WildEarth Guardians filed a lawsuit against the Fish and Wildlife Service seeking protection for the mist forestfly, an insect found only in Montana's Glacier National Park.

Three other actions will follow this week, including lawsuits and petitions on a butterfly found at two spots along the Gulf Coast, a fish that depends on coral reefs in the Pacific Ocean and a rare salamander in New Mexico's Jemez Mountains.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Valerie Fellows said Monday that the agency's listing and critical habitat budget had been usurped by lawsuits and court-ordered actions for nearly a decade.

"We essentially lost all of our own discretion to use funding for listing candidates and making petition findings, as we were completely driven by court orders," she said.

Fellows said the agency intends to finalize listings for at least 50 species in the coming year.

The Center for Biological Diversity also launched an effort in December to protect 1,000 of what it considers the most endangered species by getting them on the list during President Barack Obama's first term. The group also is seeking court action on 280 species and has warned it will sue over an additional 144 species, including the plains bison and the California golden trout.

Kieran Suckling, the center's executive director, said Obama has a choice of being a leader in protecting the nation's plants and animals or he can let "the extinction crisis devolve into the political pandering that has characterized his approach on health care and global warming."

If the president doesn't act, Suckling said: "We'll haul him through the court system."

Paul Krausman, a biologist and professor at the University of Montana, said he doesn't think the backlog will ever be eliminated. The danger, he said, is that the listings are being left to the courts rather than biologists.

Despite the backlog, Krausman said other countries envy the United States for the strides it has made in conservation since the act was signed into law.

"The progress has been phenomenal. That's why we have a lot of the species that we have today," he said.