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Much of the population 'considered to be healthy,' official says

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Despite ongoing threats, Yellowstone cutthroat trout in the West occupy more of their historic habitat than previously thought, and most of the places they live are in good or excellent shape, according to a new assessment of the fish.

The fish, an icon of the West with its characteristic red jawline slash, is expanding in some areas, declining in others but generally holding its own, state and federal officials said Wednesday.

"It's essentially a mixed bag," said Wade Fredenberg, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist in Kalispell.

The agency reiterated its 2006 decision not to place the Yellowstone cutthroat trout on the endangered-species list, even though the trout face hybridization from other fish, threats to their habitat and, in Yellowstone National Park, dramatic declines due to non-native lake trout, which eat cutthroats.

"There's still a lot of the population considered to be healthy," said Travis Horton, with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The latest study said that of the 17,393 miles of stream and lakes once occupied by Yellowstone cutthroats, they are now in about 7,527 miles, roughly 43 percent. Previously, it was thought the fish were in about 36 percent of their historic habitat.

Bruce May, a retired U.S. Forest Service biologist, said the difference is not necessarily because there are more cutthroats, but because of researchers' ability to now consider more lakes where the fish live.

The cutthroat, one of 13 trout subspecies, once swam along thousands of miles of lakes and streams in Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and smaller parts of Utah and Nevada. The fish suffered roughly a 50 percent decline over the past 200 years, mostly because of human development and overfishing.

Several environmental groups sued after a 2001 decision not to extend federal endangered species protection to the cutthroat. In February 2006, the Fish and Wildlife Service again said listing the species wasn't warranted but that reviews of its status would continue.

The latest review, conducted by 32 state and federal biologists, was released to the public this week.

It found 383 Yellowstone cutthroat populations, ranging in size from a few fish to nearly 100,000. "Conservation populations" - those with the most pure genetics - were found in 35 of the 39 watersheds it once occupied.

The species' largest refuge, Yellowstone Lake in Yellowstone Park, has been hit hard in recent years by lake trout and, to a lesser degree, whirling disease.

That population, estimated in the late 1970s to be 3.5 million to 4 million, is now probably in the hundreds of thousands, said Todd Koel, the park's supervisory fish biologist.

Noah Greenwald, of the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that petitioned to list the Yellowstone cutthroat, said he's glad to see a more extensive assessment but thinks it underplays the cumulative threats to the cutthroat.

Most, he said, face hybridization and competition from non-native fish along with degrading habitat and isolation, he said.

"It ends up being a very small number of populations that are secure," Greenwald said.

It also doesn't consider another looming threat, he said.

"The key thing we're going to be looking at in the next 10 to 20 years is climate change," Greenwald said. "With these guys being in the top of the watersheds with nowhere else to go, in times of drought they're really going to be in trouble."

The assessment is more of a snapshot of current conditions and not a full assessment of threats. The implications of global warming on the trout are still unknown, government officials said.

"That's something we're still trying to get our hands around," Fredenberg said.

It's also still hard to discern an upward or downward trend in the overall population in the West in recent years, biologists said. But the new assessment offers a solid baseline to track future fluctuations, Fredenberg said.

In the meantime, public and private efforts to secure and protect habitat and ensure the overall survival of the Yellowstone will continue, they said.

"The fact that the fish isn't listed doesn't mean everything is going to grind to a halt," Fredenberg said.