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Groups seek federal protections for 404 species

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. -- A group of seven conservation organizations on Tuesday petitioned the federal government to protect a whopping 404 aquatic species in the South, triggering a massive automatic review by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Tucson, Ariz.-based Center for Biological Diversity, among others, filed the 1,145-page petition. It seeks protections for 48 fish, 92 mussels and snails, 92 crustaceans, 82 plants, 13 reptiles, four mammals, 15 amphibians, 55 insects, and three birds.

It includes 10 species of snails in Florida, a turtle in Arkansas, 11 species of crawfish in Tennessee,

26 plants in South Carolina, three beetle species in West Virginia and 13 mussel species in North Carolina.

The petition seeks protections under the Endangered Species Act for the 404 species in all 12 southern states, some overlapping.

The unusually high number “is definitely what we consider a mega-petition and will take significant staff and resources to begin to address it,” said Valerie Fellows of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The agency first must review the entire petition for merit, which usually takes about 90 days. If it doesn’t quash it, the service then has 12 months to review each species for potential listing

and to decide whether any merit further review. That kicks off another 12-month period, if there are potential candidates, after which the service would decide what species to protect or table some as low priorities.

The petitioners claim rivers in the Southeastern U.S. are under threat from dams, pollution and increasing water demands, making the region “the extinction capital of North America.”

“These 404 species are an integral part of what makes the Southeast unique,” said Noah Greenwald, the center’s endangered species program director. “Saving them would improve the health of southeastern rivers and help ensure a high quality of life for people now and in the future.”