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Enviro Groups' Petition Seeks Protection for 404 Aquatic Plants, Animals in Southeast

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Environmental groups have petitioned the Obama administration to add 404 species from rivers in the southeastern United States to the Endangered Species List.

Those plants and animals will go extinct unless their ecosystems are protected, the Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups argue in the petition filed yesterday.

Dams and water diversions are changing rivers' water levels, while logging, farming and wetlands development are removing buffers that once protected rivers from run-off pollution, said Noah Greenwald, director of the center's endangered species program.

"With unparalleled diversity and a variety of severe threats, the Southeast's rivers are the extinction capital of North America," Greenwald said. "These 404 species need Endangered Species Act protection to have any chance at survival."

Species included in the petition: 48 fish, 92 mussels and snails, 92 crustaceans, 82 plants, 13 reptiles, four mammals, 15 amphibians, 55 insects and three birds. Their homes are in Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, Georgia, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Florida.

The petition is the second-largest ever,

behind a 2007 action from Wildearth Guardians that sought to list 475 species in the Southwest. Of the 475, 399 were rejected, 71 are still under review and four were approved for federal protection.

Among the proposed listings is the Wherry sweet pitcher, a carnivorous plant that uses its flowers to lure insects into slick-sided cones that contain digestive juices, and the Florida sandhill crane, a migratory waterbird that grows several feet tall and has a vermilion head.

The species are put at risk by rising temperatures and droughts that are stressing Southeast rivers and by a growing human population that demands larger water supplies, said Cynthia Sarthou of the Gulf Restoration Network, one of several regional groups that signed on to the petition.

ESA listings for aquatic animals and plants could bring critical habitat designations, land-use restrictions that require developers to minimize their potential impacts on natural resources.

The 404 listings sought by the petition is more than the Fish and Wildlife Service is asked to review in most years and will overwhelm the agency's resources, service spokeswoman Valerie Fellows said.

The Endangered Species Act requires the service to determine whether species need federal protection within a year of receiving a petition, but

actions of this magnitude make those targets impossible, Fellows said.

"The result is a vicious cycle of missed deadlines, litigation to enforce deadlines, court orders or settlement agreements that commit future resources, and even less unencumbered capacity to respond to new petitions," she said.

The petition is part of the Center for Biological Diversity's campaign to force listings and habitat protections this year for 1,000 of the "most imperiled" U.S. species.

In February the group filed a series of lawsuits attempting to force the administration to pick up the pace on listings for 93 plants and animals.

The group is also suing the Fish and Wildlife Service in an attempt to force full ESA protections for "candidate species" -- 252 animals and plants whose protection has been delayed while the agency focuses its attention elsewhere.

Large petitions for new listings such as the one filed yesterday soak up resources needed for addressing the candidate-species backlog, Fellows said.

The service had planned to move five species off the candidate list in 2010 and propose them for full ESA protection, Fellows said, but yesterday's petition may make that goal impossible.

Reporter Allison Winter contributed.