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Fish review begins

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GREEN RIVER -- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials, at the behest of a federal judge, have reversed an earlier decision and will now conduct a review of the Colorado river cutthroat trout to see if the fish deserves federal protection.

A federal judge recently ordered the agency to review a petition to add the Colorado River cutthroat trout to either the endangered or threatened species list.

Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Patty Gelatt said the agency intends to complete the 12-month status review by the court-ordered due date of June 7, 2007.

The agency denied a petition to list the fish under the Endangered Species Act in April 2004 that was filed by conservationists. Officials said at the time the petition did not provide substantial biological information to indicate a listing is warranted.

The [Center for Biological Diversity](#), the Biodiversity Legal Foundation, the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance and others petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service in October 2000 to list the fish in its occupied habitat.

Biodiversity officials lauded the decision Tuesday and said they were pleased that the judge had overturned the agency's initial 90-day finding.

"Our whole aim has been to secure strong protections for this declining native trout species, and unfortunately we had to take the government to court on this one, but we held them accountable to the survival of this species, and now they're taking another look at their decision," Biodiversity spokesman Jeremy Nichols said in a phone interview from Denver.

"We hope this time they do carefully review the best available science and take into consideration public input rather than selective input from (state wildlife) agencies," he said. "Our goal is to get to this next step and to do this thorough review and really take a look at the issue and science and see if the species really does need listing."

The number of the native fish has declined, the petition said, due to overfishing by westbound settlers, dam construction, mining and timber harvest, and competition from nonnative fish such as brook trout.

According to the latest federal data, there are 286 populations of Colorado River cutthroat trout considered more than 90 percent pure. Those populations occupy more than 1,000 stream miles, and 41 populations occupy more than 1,100 acres of lakes in Wyoming, Colorado and Utah.

Federal officials, in denying the petition, had said conservation plans implemented by affected tribes and states were sufficient to protect the fish.

State agencies, including the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, joined with federal agencies and Indian tribes to form a task force in 1999 to address wide-ranging conservation efforts. The task force developed conservation agreements and other measures for the Colorado cutthroat that have been successfully implemented over the past few years.

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