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Clinch Coalition joins petitioners seeking protection for 404 species

By Wes Bunch

NICKELSVILLE — A local environmental group was one of several throughout the Southeast to sign a petition recently filed by the Center for Biological Diversity that seeks protection for 404 species dependent on the region's waterways under the Endangered Species Act.

The Southwest Virginia-based Clinch Coalition joined the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) and six other conservation groups in signing the 1,145-page petition asking the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to extend endangered species protection to a variety of mussels, snails, crustaceans, amphibians, insects, plants, mammals and fish.

"With unparalleled diversity and a variety of severe threats, the Southeast's rivers are the extinction capital of North America," said Noah Greenwald, endangered species program director at the CBD. "Dams, pollution, growing demand for water, and uncertainty

about future water availability with global climate change mean these 404 species need Endangered Species Act protection to have any chance at survival."

Greenwald said dramatic action is needed to counter an "extinction crisis" that is unfolding in the Southeast because of impacts to its rivers and streams.

Species dependent on these waterways can be adversely affected by a variety of factors including dams, livestock, mining, logging, pollution and climate change.

Clinch Coalition Director Steve Brooks said his organization was asked to sign the petition because the Clinch River "supports the highest diversity of freshwater mussels in the world and is surrounded by forested mountains that contain an extensive number of plants and wildlife."

If approved, Brooks said the petition would help protect species found in and around not only the Clinch River, but the Holston River and Powell River as well.

According to the Nature Conservancy, which has its own Clinch Valley Program that focuses on protecting the waterway, the 2,200-square-mile watershed of the three rivers provides habitat to 19 species of rare fish, 40 types of mussels — 29 of which are globally rare — and other rare animal and plant species.

Protecting those species will not only help the region's economy by promoting environmental tourism and protecting areas used for fishing and other outdoor activities, Brooks said, it's also the right thing to do from an ecological aspect.

"We being man, have brought an imbalance in nature about, and we need to do all we can to correct that," Brooks said. "It's like the canary in the mine. Seeing these things go is an account of what we're doing to the environment."

Overall, rivers and streams in the Southeast are home to 62 percent of fish species and 91 percent of mussel species found in the United States.