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Two Maine bat species one step closer to federal protection

RUMFORD — Two Maine bat species could be protected later this year under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Responding to a Jan. 21, 2010, petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday decided that the eastern small-footed and northern long-eared bats may warrant federal protection as threatened or endangered species.

“Today’s decision, commonly known as a 90-day petition finding, is based on scientific and commercial information about the species provided in the petition requesting protection of the species under the ESA,” Meagan Racey, public affairs specialist for the USFWS, said in a report on Tuesday in Hadley, Mass.

She said the petition finding doesn’t mean that the service has decided it’s appropriate to protect either species under the ESA.

“Rather, this finding is the first step in a process that triggers a more thorough review of all biological

information available,” she said. That finding would be published on June 29, 2011, in the Federal Register.

“The service will initiate a more thorough status review for both bats to determine whether these species should be added to the Federal List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife,” Racey said.

Eastern small-footeds are about 3 inches long and have a wingspan of 8 to 10 inches from tip to tip, John DePue, furbearer and small mammal biologist with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, said Tuesday in Augusta.

Northern long-eareds are about 3 and a half inches long, with wingspans of 9 to 11 inches, he said.

DePue said neither bat is listed as endangered or threatened in Maine, but that could change pending the outcome of surveys underway on the state’s eight bat species.

The eastern small-footed bat occurs from eastern Canada and New England south to Alabama and Georgia and west to Oklahoma.



Northern long-eared bat

They are believed to be rare throughout their range, although they are more common in the northern and southern U.S., Racey said.

The northern long-eared bat occurs across much of the eastern and north-central U.S. and across all Canadian provinces west to the southern Northwest Territories and eastern British Columbia.

The species is variably distributed and rarely found in large numbers, Racey said.

“We have northern long-eareds throughout the state of Maine,” DePue said. “The eastern small-footeds, it’s harder to say.”

He said one or two small-footeds have been found in a couple of hibernating caves or hibernaculum in Western Maine. They’re also found in greater numbers in Acadia National Park, where a survey is currently underway, and southern Maine and maybe as far north as Lincolnville.

“They could be farther north, but we just don’t have survey data,” DePue said.

The recently discovered and quickly-spreading disease known as white-nose syndrome is driving the Center’s petition for eastern small-footed and northern long-eared bats.

“Both are severely threatened by a recently discovered and quickly spreading disease known as white-nose syndrome,” Mollie Matteson, with the Center for Biological Diversity, said Tuesday in Richmond, Vt.

“We hope today’s announcement will serve as a wake-up call for urgent action to save our bats.”

White-nose syndrome, named for a deadly white fungus found on the noses of affected bats, is associated with the newly discovered fungus, *Geomyces destructans*, DePue said last month when it was first discovered in bats in two inactive mine caves in Oxford County.

The fungus, which is not harmful to humans, has killed more than 1 million cave-hibernating bats nationwide since its discovery in 2006.

But, so far, biologists in Maine have only found the disease in the little brown bat and northern long-eared bats.

“This would be the first listing in the U.S. of a bat species that includes effects due to WNS,” Ann Froschauer, National White-Nose Syndrome Communications Leader with USFWS, said by email Tuesday in Hadley, Mass.

Racey said that information in the petition and in the USFWS files indicates that the continued existence of eastern small-footeds or northern long-eareds may be threatened by several factors.

These include habitat destruction and degradation, disturbance of hibernation areas and maternity roost, and impacts from white-nose syndrome.

“Existing regulations of these activities may be inadequate to protect the two species,” Racey said.

“Timber harvesting and mining activities have the potential to impact these two bat species.”

“Should the species become federally listed, these types of impacts would require Endangered Species Act authorization,” Racey said.

The Service works with project proponents to incorporate measures into a project to avoid, minimize and offset any unavoidable impacts to the species, she said.

“Projects typically move forward with ESA authorization if appropriate measures are incorporated into the project,” she said.