



Agency Reconsidering Protection For Longfin Smelt

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Two environmental groups announced a federal court settlement in San Francisco Wednesday under which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will reconsider endangered species protection for longfin smelt in the San Francisco Bay-Delta.

The 5-inch smelt is found in Pacific Coast estuaries from the Bay Area to Alaska.

Jeff Miller, a conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the species is severely depleted in the Bay-Delta, and that the Bay-Delta is home to the largest population of the fish.

“U.S. Endangered Species Act protection is desperately needed for longfin smelt and other formerly abundant fish in the San Francisco estuary that are being driven to extinction by record water diversions from the delta,” Miller said.

The agreement was approved by U.S. District Judge Marilyn Patel Wednesday and settles a lawsuit in which the Center for Biological Diversity and the Bay Institute challenged a 2009 wildlife service decision not to list the Bay-Delta longfin smelt as threatened or endangered.

The agency said at the time that while the Bay-Delta population was low, it was “not markedly separate from the other populations” of the fish

and that a range-wide assessment of the species was needed.

Wednesday’s settlement requires the service to complete that broader assessment by Sept. 30. The agency must also take another look by Sept. 30 at whether the Bay-Delta population qualifies as a separate group needing federal protection.

Jon Rosenfield, a biologist with the Bay Institute, said, “The data clearly indicate that longfin smelt, which were once among the most abundant forage fish in our estuary, are almost gone.

“Scientists agree that the San Francisco population is uniquely important to the species as a whole and to the estuary’s food web.”

Wildlife service spokesman Steve Martarano said, “This will give us an opportunity to give a broad assessment of the species.”

Martarano said the agency hopes to announce the start of a 45-day public comment period quickly, possibly as soon as next week.

The California Fish and Game Commission declared the longfin smelt population within the state to be threatened under the California Endangered Species Act in 2009.

The longfin smelt is a relative of the delta smelt, which has been federally listed as threatened