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## Feds agree to rule on coral listing by mid-April



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- AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press Writer

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HONOLULU (AP) — The National Marine Fisheries Services has agreed to decide by mid-April whether 82 coral species should be listed as endangered or threatened.

The federal agency last year said a petition submitted by an Arizona-based conservation group had substantial information that a listing may be warranted. But it failed to rule on the Center for Biological Diversity's petition by a legally mandated deadline.

The fisheries service and the group reached a settlement on Tuesday requiring the fisheries service to submit its decision on the issue to the Federal Register by April 15.

The Center for Biological Diversity says coral reefs are facing extinction due to overfishing, pollution, global warming and ocean acidification.

"Unless we protect them right now, coral reefs will be lost within decades, and our grandchildren will never see these colorful underwater forests teeming with life," Miyoko Sakashita, the director of the organization's oceans program, said in a statement.

Currently, only reef-building staghorn and elkhorn corals are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Of the species under review, 75 are found in the Pacific.

Nine exist in Hawaii waters, including ringed rice coral, which sometimes has a purple hue but is other times rust orange or brown.

It's a candidate for listing because it's only found in the Hawaiian islands. This makes the species vulnerable to being wiped out if there's a heat wave or an invasive species infiltrates its habitat.

It grows in small patches in the nearshore waters of Hanauma Bay, one of Hawaii's most popular nature preserves. It provides food and shelter for large numbers of fish and other marine life.

Protection under the Endangered Species Act could put fishing, dumping, dredging, offshore oil development and other activities under stricter regulatory scrutiny.