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Center notifies government it will sue to protect corals

By ALDETH LEWIN

ST. THOMAS - In an effort to push through protection for endangered coral, a national environmental group has filed paperwork that it plans to sue the federal government, which it says has failed to develop a recovery plan for threatened elkhorn and staghorn corals.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a formal notice of intent to sue the National Marine Fisheries Service last week for failing to develop a recovery plan for the two species of coral that live off the coast of Florida and in the Caribbean - including the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The 60-day notice of intent to sue is a prerequisite to filing a lawsuit under the Endangered Species Act.

The corals first were listed on the Endangered Species Act in 2006, after a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity. They were the first coral species ever to be listed.

Once a species is listed, under the federal law, a unique set of rules and regulations must be developed to protect it. While many species listed under the Endangered Species Act have built-in protections, they do not automatically apply to threatened species unless the federal government finds such protections necessary for the conservation of the species.

The federal government drafted a rule for the protection of the two coral species, and it was implemented in November 2008.

Under the 2008 draft, all “take” and trade involving the two branching types of coral will be against the law. Any collection or activities that harm the coral are considered to be take.

Other prohibited activities will include

- Removing or damaging the coral or its habitat.
- Polluting or contaminating the corals’ habitat.
- Boating or fishing activities that harm or break the corals.

In addition to the rule, however, the federal government also was required to draft a recovery plan to begin the process of restoring the coral population.

“These elegant corals are heading toward an ugly end if we don’t act soon,” Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director at the center, said in a written statement. “We need to start with halting their decline - only then will corals have a chance.”

Recovery plans are the main tool for identifying actions necessary to save endangered species from extinction and eventually be able to remove their protection under the Endangered Species Act, Sakashita said. Species that have had dedicated recovery plans for two or more years are far more likely to improve than those without recovery plans, she said.

The timely development and implementation of a plan is critical to saving elkhorn and staghorn corals because it will identify specifically what is necessary to save them, such as habitat restoration and protection, Sakashita said.

Elkhorn and staghorn coral typically live in water depths of no more than 30 feet and feature antler-like protrusions. The coral reefs of which they are a part provide habitat for fish, crustaceans and other marine life.

Officials from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration have said that elkhorn and staghorn corals have declined as much as 97 percent since 1985 in some areas around Florida and the Caribbean.

Sakashita said the species is threatened by global warming and ocean acidification, as well as by human activity.

The warming of the water leads to coral bleaching, and acidification - the increasing levels of carbon dioxide in the ocean - limits the amount of calcium the coral can draw out of the water to build skeletons.

Pressures from disease, fishing and pollution also have led to coral decline, Sakashita said.

“If we want to bring our oceans’ rich coral reefs back to life, we’ll need to take really decisive action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Otherwise that pollution will wipe out the reefs by mid-century,” she said.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to protecting endangered species and wild places