

U.S. Fish and Wildlife proposes 4 local salamanders as endangered

Cedar Park – Leander Statesman

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed this morning listing four local salamanders on the Endangered Species Act hours before the Williamson County Commissioners Court approved a resolution against the listings.

The Austin blind, Jollyville Plateau, Georgetown and Salado salamanders live within Travis, Williamson and Bell counties, and the proposed listings would designate almost 6,000 acres as a critical habitat for the creatures.

The proposed listings stem from lawsuits filed by Save Our Springs Alliance and the Center for Biological Diversity, which call for the salamanders to be listed among 250 other species as endangered. Colette Adkins Giese, an attorney for the CBD, said the listings give the creatures a “fighting chance.”

“Giving them a critical habitat is a big help in giving them a path to recovery,” she said. “Those areas are essential for their habitat and will keep them from harm.”

Many local officials, county commissioners and federal officials have opposed the listing, saying it is unnecessary and detrimental to local development. In July, U.S. Rep. John Carter introduced the Salamander Community Conservation Act, HR 6219, which would block premature listing of the species as endangered without adequate scientific data to support such a decision, according to a press release.

Williamson County commissioners created the Williamson County Conservation Foundation, which is funding a five-year study on the salamanders. Commissioners have said there is not enough data on the four species to know if they are in need of protection. But Giese said the 346-page proposal from USFWS has ample evidence to support the listings.

“We feel the science behind it is taking the day instead of some of the political pressure heaped upon this,” she said.

Cedar Park Mayor Pro Tem Tony Dale has been a vocal opponent to the listings. In an editorial published by the Cedar Park-Leander Statesman, he wrote evidence collected by the WCCF study is showing expanding development is not harming the salamanders.

“Many of us involved in working on this issue have seen USFWS is using data that does not support its likely conclusion that the species is endangered,” he wrote.

USFWS is holding public hearings on the proposed listings. The first hearing is 5:30 p.m. Sept. 5 at the Wingate, 1209 N. IH-35 North in Round Rock, and the second hearing is 6:30 p.m. Sept. 6 at the Thompson Conference Center, 2405 Robert Dedman Dr., Room 2.102, in Austin.