



## Group petitions to list local fish as endangered

ST. GEORGE — Arguing that local protection efforts have failed, an environmental group petitioned Tuesday to have the Virgin River spinedace listed as an endangered species.

The Center for Biological Diversity contends that the spinedace, a silvery minnow once common throughout the Virgin River basin, needs heightened federal protection.

The fish has lost more than half of its natural range due to water development, habitat degradation, drought and the effects of climate change, the petition charges, citing 2010 surveys that detected spinedace in only 52 percent of sampled sites.

Two other Virgin River fish species, the wound-fin and Virgin River chub, are already listed as endangered, along with the southwestern willow flycatcher, a bird that nests in vegetation along the waterways.

Jim McMahon, a Brookside resident and hydrologist who helped develop the petition, said he has argued for years that the multitude of water diversions, combined with overgrazing and other man-made factors, have degraded the waterways to the point where any of the native species are going to struggle to survive.

“It’s about restoring natural processes,” he said. “The fish evolved in response to the natural variability of the river — the natural variability that would allow them to have vibrant populations.”

Filed with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the petition argues that designating the fish as threatened or endangered would give the spinedace

protection it has not received through the various multi-agency programs currently in effect to help fish in the Virgin River basin, including the Virgin Spinedace Conservation Agreement and Strategy, a voluntary agreement created in 1995.

“There has been a net loss of habitat quality while the conservation agreement has been in place, and threats to the spinedace are increasing,” according to the petition.

But Henry Maddux, director of recovery programs with the Department of Natural Resources, said he sees an endangered species designation as only hurting the spinedace’s chances.

Maddux, the state supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service when the original spinedace agreement was formed, said that the fish is already largely treated like an endangered species. He said federal designation would threaten the partnerships that have developed between the state and local agencies and individuals.

“We have a lot of partners at the table bringing significant resources, and we’ve raised awareness about the spinedace,” he said. “If that goes under federal listing, I think some of our partners start to question whether being involved and trying to do the right thing does them any good.”

A federal designation would also burden caretakers with less flexibility, he said.

“I think what would happen is there would be a longer process to get permits for things like pipeline crossings and things like that.”

The latest state assessment of the Virgin Spinedace Conservation Agreement and Strategy, completed in 2008,

states that the program had helped to reduce threats to the fish, combat invasive fish species and otherwise help encourage population growth and maintenance.

Maddux said the program is responsible for establishing spinedace populations in more habitat today than when the effort started. He acknowledged that the program has work to do to get to its stated goal of establishing populations along 80 percent of the fish's natural habitat.

"We're not there yet, but we are getting closer," he said.