

The Colorado Springs Gazette
Environmentalists suing over dirt bikes on popular Springs area trail
Concerned about impacts to endangered fish
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An environmental group announced Thursday it will sue Colorado Springs Utilities and Pike National Forest, seeking to halt what it says is damage to endangered trout habitat from dirt bikes on one of the region's most popular motorized trails.

The Tucson, Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity claims greenback cutthroat trout in Bear Creek are being harmed by dirt bikes on Trail No. 667, also known as the Buckhorn Trail, which runs from High Drive, through the national forest to a popular trail network on Utilities property known as Jones Park.

Dirt bikes are allowed on the trails. Environmentalists say the trail needs to be moved.

"It's a pretty steeply-sloped drainage. It's very erosive soil so the dirt bikes are just loosening up soil that's then eroded into the streams," said Noah Greenwald, the group's endangered species director. "That can bury spawning pools, actually choking the eggs out, which need to be really oxygenated, or fill in the pools."

Greenback cutthroat trout have been decimated throughout the West by disease and competition from other imported trout species, and they were once thought to be extinct. The official Colorado state fish, it is listed as "threatened" under the Endangered Species Act.

Federal officials have gone to great lengths to protect them. Last summer, the Pikes Peak Range Riders had to choose a different route for its five-day ride after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said crossing Bear Creek four times would be detrimental to their spawning. The Severy Creek Trail on Pikes Peak has been closed to the public for 13 years because of concerns for the fish.

The environmental group claims the Bear Creek fish are believed to be "a long-lost subspecies known as yellow-fin cutthroat, not seen since the late 1800s," and that their numbers dropped 30 percent from 2008 to 2011.

"If this rate of population decline continues, greenback cutthroat in Bear Creek could soon be completely destroyed," the group says in its notice of intent to sue, which is required 60 days before filing a lawsuit under the Endangered Species Act.

The group wants the agencies to close the trail to dirt bikes until it can be re-routed away from Bear Creek.

Utilities and forest service officials declined to comment, saying they had not had a chance to review the notice.

The lawsuit does not seek to limit hikers or mountain bikers from the trail.
