

Environmental groups plan to sue to stop water treatment plant construction

Lawsuit filed over water plant

Two environmental groups have sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make it immediately add the Jollyville Plateau salamander to the endangered species list. They hope the listing will force the federal agency to halt construction of a shaft being built in conjunction with a water-treatment plant near Lake Travis.



The groups contend that the salamander is imperiled because of a shaft the city is drilling near the intersection of RM 620 and RM 2222. Once the 40-foot-wide, 200-foot-deep shaft is finished, crews will begin digging sideways, creating a tunnel for pipes to carry water from the treatment plant near Lake Travis to a reservoir at McNeil Road and U.S. 183.

The shaft passes through a honeycombed layer of small limestone caverns and fissures that are part of the northern Edwards Aquifer, which feeds Bull Creek and springs where the Jollyville salamander lives. The salamander is on the federal waiting list to be added to the endangered species list; the process can take years, and the environmental groups want it done more quickly.

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By Marty Toohey AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

The Save Our Springs Alliance and Center for Biological Diversity said Monday that they will sue the federal government, alleging a species of salamander is not being adequately protected in the City of Austin's construction of a water treatment plant, the latest effort to derail the costly project.

The two environmental groups said they want Jollyville Plateau salamander added to the federal endangered species list. They contend that the city has imperiled the salamander as it builds the \$500 million treatment plant, a charge city officials deny.

By adding the salamander to the endangered list, the two environmental groups contend, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service would be empowered and possibly obligated to stop construction, said Collette Adkins Giese, a lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity.

The two groups informed the Fish and Wildlife Service on Monday of their "intent to sue," a required step before a lawsuit can actually be filed.

Last month, the shaft sprang a leak that critics say could siphon water from the Bull Creek area. Chuck Lesniak, the city environmental officer on the project, said then that the leak was minor but that if it continued unabated, it could present a long-term problem. But he said Monday that city crews had made progress in repairing the leak and that soon it would be fixed.

Lesniak said the project was also designed as if the salamander was already endangered, with the accompanying level of caution.

"We don't anticipate any impact to Bull Creek and the nearby springs," he said.

Environmental groups have previously filed unsuccessful lawsuits to stop the water treatment plant construction, which began two years ago.