



Interior listed 81 plants and animals in past year, reducing backlog

Phil Taylor,
E&E reporter
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The Interior Department over the past year listed 81 species as endangered or threatened, reducing its backlog of imperiled candidate species to fewer than 150 for the first time since the 1970s, according to a federal report.

The new listing decisions, many of them compelled by a legal settlement with environmental groups, leave just 146 species on the candidate list: 94 animals and 52 plants.

The list stood at more than 250 species only a few years ago.

“We find that we made expeditious progress to add qualified species to the lists in FY 2013,” said the Fish and Wildlife Service’s annual candidate notice of review.

While more than three dozen of the newly listed species are located in Hawaii, the 81 listings are the most since the first term of the Clinton administration, according to wildlife advocates.

The announcement was cheered today by the Center for Biological Diversity, which, along with WildEarth Guardians, signed landmark

settlements with FWS in 2011 setting deadlines for final listing decisions on all 252 candidate species.

“The Fish and Wildlife Service deserves credit for the excellent progress it’s making protecting our most endangered animals and plants,” said Tierra Curry, a conservation biologist at CBD.

Candidate species are those that agency scientists have determined need Endangered Species Act protections but whose listings were precluded by a scarcity of resources.

The settlement set deadlines for final listing decisions but also required the environmental groups to limit the number of new listing petitions and lawsuits they filed.

While the settlement has attracted intense scrutiny from industry and Republicans on Capitol Hill, the Obama administration argues it has reduced litigation and allowed resources to be focused on species of highest concern.

Fish and Wildlife last year granted protections for Hawaiian flowers and damselflies, freshwater mussels in the Southeast, and butterflies from the Pacific Northwest and Las Vegas, CBD said. It also protected the Florida bonneted bat, salamanders from Texas and a fish from West Virginia called the diamond darter.

Over the past year, it also proposed new listings for wider-ranging species, including the wolverine and the lesser prairie chicken, a southern Great Plains grouse set to receive a final listing decision next March.

Other species proposed for protection were the Yosemite toad, the red knot shorebird, the western yellow-billed cuckoo and the northern long-eared bat, which is threatened by white-nose syndrome, FWS said.

CBD said it anticipates that the vast majority of the 146 species still on the candidate list will receive ESA protections within the next three years.

The agency today also elevated the listing priority for several species, including the southern Idaho ground squirrel, Washington ground squirrel, Kentucky arrow darter and Cumberland arrow darter.

Scrutiny of the 1973 endangered species law has increased in recent years, with Republicans and property rights advocates warning that it has caused an undue burden on the economy and landowner well-being.

Republican senators this week introduced a bill that would require governors and Congress to sign off on new endangered species listings and would allow governors to take over management of listed species that roam solely within their borders (E&E Daily, Nov. 20).

But the agency has worked successfully to stave off listings of some candidate species through conservation agreements with states.

Withdrawals of listing proposals for the dunes sagebrush lizard and coral pink sand dunes beetle have alleviated the concerns of ranchers, drillers and off-highway vehicle users, though such moves have ignited their own controversy.