

Courthouse News Service

Texas Salamanders Are Threatened, Agency Says

By Ramona Young-Gridle



WASHINGTON (CN) - As part of a court-approved five-year work plan between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and one of its most frequent litigants, two unusual Texas salamanders have been listed under the Endangered Species Act with designated critical habitat. The final listing of two other salamanders has been postponed for six months.

Both of the listed salamanders are cave-dwellers found only in central Texas. Both depend on the Edwards aquifer, which covers 155 square miles from southern Travis County to northern Hayes County.

The two salamander species have no lungs because they are entirely aquatic and breathe through feathery external gills and their skin.

The five-inch long Austin blind salamander is a translucent pearly white color. Because it

spends its entire life in complete darkness, its rudimentary eyes have all but disappeared and are totally hidden beneath the skin.

The two-inch long Jollyville Plateau salamander has well-developed eyes and is more colorful. It spends its time in water that is only about a foot deep in its spring-fed habitat.

The Jollyville salamander is closely related to the Georgetown and Salado salamanders, which joined the Austin blind and Jollyville in the proposed listing rule last year. That action was spurred by the 2011 settlement agreement between Fish and Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) to list hundreds of species over five years through the work plan.

Although all four salamanders were proposed for endangered listing status, the USFWS has reopened the comment period and delayed the final listing for the Georgetown and Salado salamanders in a separate action due to “substantial

disagreement regarding the sufficiency or accuracy of the available data” for those two species, the agency said.

In the final listing action for the Austin blind and Jollyville salamanders, the USFWS also decided that the Jollyville does not meet the definition of endangered, so it is listed as threatened instead. “A key statutory difference between a threatened species and an endangered species is the timing of when a species may be in danger of extinction, either now (endangered species) or in the foreseeable future (threatened species),” according to the action.

The salamanders are threatened by the degradation of water quality and water flow in the aquifer. Impervious cover, or “any surface material that prevents water from filtering into the soil, such as roads, rooftops, sidewalks, patios, paved surfaces, or compacted soil,” threatens the salamanders’ habitat because it disturbs water flow and introduces contaminants into

the water. Impervious cover is a hallmark of increasing urbanization. The human population in Travis County is expected to increase 94 percent between 2010 and 2050, the action noted.

Other threats include drought, climate change, construction, feral hogs, and fertilizer and pesticide use, the action said.

“These Texas salamanders can’t survive in waterways polluted with pesticides, industrial chemicals and other toxins, so they are excellent indicators of the health of the environment,” CBD lawyer Collette Adkins Giese was quoted as saying in the group’s press release. “Endangered Species Act protection for the salamanders also protects the springs that give drinking water and recreation to Texas communities,” she said.

Fish and Wildlife has designated 120 acres of protected habitat for the Austin blind salamander and 4,331 acres for the Jollyville Plateau salamander in a separate action.

Both the final listing rule and the final critical habitat designation are effective Sept. 19.