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## Giant eastern hellbender salamander, once common in North Alabama streams, closer to Endangered Species Act protection

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NASHVILLE, Tennessee - A giant salamander that was once a common sight in North Alabama streams is closer to receiving federal protection.

On Monday, the Center for Biological Diversity reached a settlement with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service giving the agency five years to consider whether to protect the eastern hellbender under the Endangered Species Act.

Collette Adkins Giese, a biologist and attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said hellbender populations are in "sharp decline" because of water pollution related to mining, agriculture and animal operations. The hellbenders' permeable skin absorbs contaminants that wash into streams, which can cause skin lesions.

It is not known how many of the giant amphibians are left in their native range of Alabama, Tennessee, Mississippi, Georgia, Kentucky, North

Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New York.

In Alabama, eastern hellbenders were primarily found in waterways that feed into the Tennessee River.

"Although eastern hellbenders still face a long wait for Endangered Species Act protection, today's agreement provides a deadline that ensures they'll get considered for these lifesaving protections before it's too late," said Adkins Giese. "And in the meantime, I'm hopeful that the Fish and Wildlife Service, states, scientists and others will ramp up efforts to study and conserve the hellbender."

In response to a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, the Fish & Wildlife Service found in 2011 that eastern hellbenders may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act. The center sued when the agency failed to make a final



An Eastern Hellbender. (Courtesy Center for Biological Diversity)

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decision within one year, as the Endangered Species Act requires.

The settlement announced today gives the agency until 2018 to make a determination.

Also called "devil dogs" or "mud devils," eastern hellbenders can grow to 2 feet long. They secrete a toxic slime to ward off predators but are not poisonous to humans.