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Lawsuit seeks protection for Kirtland's snake

By JOHN FLESHER
Associated Press

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) - An environmental group that works to expand the federal government's lineup of protected plants and animals filed a lawsuit Tuesday on behalf of a Midwestern wetland snake.

The Center for Biological Diversity wants the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to add the Kirtland's snake to the endangered and threatened species list. The agency missed a deadline four years ago for making a decision on the reptile, said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney and biologist with the nonprofit organization.

"This is an extremely imperiled animal," Giese said. "We're running out of time to save it."

Spokeswoman Georgia Parham said the Fish and Wildlife Service could not comment on pending litigation. The suit was filed in U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C.

In 2011, President Barack Obama's administration reached a court settlement with environmentalists that requires the agency to expedite rulings on more than 750 species. The deal has led to 118 being added to the endangered list and 24 others being proposed for protection.

The agreement allows the Center for Biological Diversity to choose a number of high-priority species each year that still await action and file lawsuits to speed things up. The Kirtland's snake was among those selected this year.

Others include the Alexander Archipelago wolf in Alaska, the San Bernardino flying squirrel, the Ichetucknee siltsnail in Florida, the black-backed woodpecker in California and South Dakota and four freshwater species from the southeastern United States including two fish, a mussel and a crayfish.

Habitat loss from logging and development, climate change,

pollution and water shortages are among reasons they could disappear.

The Kirtland's snake previously inhabited more than 100 counties in eight states, but in recent decades there have been only scattered sightings in Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Indiana and Kentucky. Many are in vacant lots near streams or wetlands - remnants of once-abundant prairie wetland habitat shrunk by farming and urban development. Some of the snakes have been collected for sale as pets.

Small and nonpoisonous, they feed on earthworms, slugs and leeches. The species is listed as endangered in Indiana, Michigan and Pennsylvania and threatened in Illinois and Ohio.

Environmentalists petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to rescue the snake in 2010. The next year, the agency found that the Kirtland's "may warrant" protection. It has yet to make a final ruling.

“We have a responsibility to protect this snake. We’re the ones driving it toward extinction,” Giese said.

People also benefit from preserving and restoring its habitat because wetlands filter toxins from