



ENDANGERED SPECIES:

Enviros, FWS reach settlements on Alaska wolf, 9 other species

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Environmental groups today announced they've reached a settlement with the Obama administration that will require the Fish and Wildlife Service to decide by the end of next year whether to grant Endangered Species Act protections for a rare Alaska wolf.

The Center for Biological Diversity said it also reached settlements with FWS setting listing deadlines for nine other species: the San Bernardino flying squirrel; the Ichetucknee siltsnail from Florida; two distinct populations of the black-backed woodpecker, from California and South Dakota; the Kirtland's snake from the Midwest; and four freshwater species from the southeastern United States, comprising two fish, a mussel and a crayfish.

Those settlements stem from lawsuits CBD is allowed to file -- 10 species per year -- under a sweeping settlement it signed with FWS in 2011 that required the government to issue final listing determinations for 250 candidate species.

One of today's biggest settlements would require a decision by Dec. 31, 2015, on the

Alexander Archipelago wolf. It could affect future logging -- particularly of old growth -- in Alaska's Tongass National Forest, the site of perennial battles between the Forest Service and environmental groups.

"This agreement is a lifeline for Alaska's rarest and most charismatic wolves," said a statement this afternoon by Rebecca Noblin, Alaska director at the Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the settlement along with Greenpeace and the Boat Co., an eco-tourism business. "We hope it serves as a wakeup call to the Forest Service that old-growth logging in America's largest national forest isn't cutting it for the wolves."

The Alexander Archipelago wolf, named for the island group that makes up most of southeast Alaska, may be threatened by logging as well as new logging roads that make it easier for hunters to find them, Fish and Wildlife said in April. The wolf is genetically distinct from other wolves in the Tongass, Noblin said.

The settlement, which awaits approval by a federal judge, comes weeks after environmental groups filed multiple lawsuits challenging the Forest Service's approval of the Big Thorne timber project in the Tongass on Prince of Wales Island (Greenwire, Aug. 27).

The lawsuits argue Big Thorne's old-growth logging will harm wolves and their Sitka black-tailed deer prey.

Today's settlement also comes as the Forest Service begins a lengthy land-use plan amendment that seeks to more quickly transition the 17-million-acre forest, the nation's largest, away from old-growth logging.

Larry Edwards, a forest campaigner for Greenpeace, said today's settlement would require a listing decision well before the Forest Service completes the amendment, which will inform the next 15 years of logging on the Tongass. The amendment is scheduled to be complete by August 2016.

If the wolf is deemed threatened or endangered, the Forest Service will have to consult with FWS to ensure logging sales do not jeopardize its survival or unduly degrade its critical habitat, if identified. It would likely influence the contours of the final land-use plan.

CBD and Greenpeace petitioned FWS to list the wolf about three years ago. FWS in March said that petition may have merit. In June, the groups filed a lawsuit against FWS to compel it to issue what's known under ESA as a 12-month finding, in which the agency determines whether to propose a listing rule. Today's settlement gives FWS until the end of 2015 to make that finding.

The wolves depend heavily on old-growth trees to provide roots for denning, the environmental groups said. The wolf's main prey, black-tailed deer, require the big trees to protect them in the winter.

Wolves on Prince of Wales have declined sharply, the groups added. Within the Big Thorne planning area, numbers dropped from about 50 in the mid-1990s to about seven in 2013, with most of the decline attributed to legal and illegal hunting, they said, citing the findings of a former state of Alaska research biologist.

CBD's action to compel today's settlement was known as a deadline lawsuit, in which the group sues to force FWS to follow strict listing timelines under ESA. Under CBD's 2011 settlement with FWS, it is only allowed to file deadline lawsuits for 10 species a year.

In contrast to those 250 candidate species -- which require up-or-down listing decisions -- FWS could also decide that the Alexander Archipelago wolf warrants protections but that a listing is precluded by a lack of resources.

Flying squirrel

CBD also cheered the settlement requiring a listing decision on the flying squirrel, a rare species near Los Angeles that eats truffles and is threatened by global warming, forest habitat destruction and predation by domestic cats, it said.

"The flying squirrel is one of the natural wonders of Southern California's mountains, but these amazing animals will vanish forever if global warming and habitat destruction go unchecked," Shaye Wolf, the center's climate science director, said in a news release.

“This agreement makes sure these squirrels won’t wait forever to get Endangered Species Act protection to help them survive these threats.”

According to the agreement, FWS is required to decide by April 29, 2016, whether the squirrel is protected. The other species face separate deadlines.

The freshwater species named in today’s settlements are the Atlantic pigtoe mussel; the slenderclaw crayfish; and two fishes, the Barrens darter and the holiday darter. CBD said the species face threats from water pollution and dams.

A listing for the Ichetucknee snail could also mean the protection of the 10 square yards of cypress roots and submerged mosses in Florida that represent its sole habitat and that are currently threatened by drought, groundwater pumping and nitrate pollution, according to CBD.

Gavin Shire, spokesman for FWS, said the agency couldn’t comment until the settlement has been finalized.