



Group to sue feds for reptile, amphibian protections

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A conservation group threatens to sue unless the feds step up reptile and amphibian protections.

The Center for Biological Diversity sent a notice Wednesday to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, threatening to sue within 60 days if the agency failed to move forward to protect 17 rare reptiles and amphibians in the southeast, 11 of them in Florida.

They are among 53 reptiles and amphibians the Arizona-based non-profit group wants the federal government to protect under the Endangered Species Act. And they represent some of America's most imperiled species of toads, salamanders, lizards, turtles and snakes, the group says.

"All these species are facing threats," said Collette Adkins Giese, a biologist and lawyer for the Center for Biological Diversity.



(Photo: Garry Tucker, USFWS)

"Ultimately, if we got these species listed, there would be protection of their habitat."

Prohibitions on collecting the rare reptile and amphibian species for the pet trade also could result, she said.

The group had formally asked the federal government to protect the 53 species in a July 2012 petition — the largest of its kind ever filed focusing only on amphibians and reptiles. The species include seven snakes, six turtles, two toads, four frogs, 10 lizards and 24 salamanders.

But more than two years later, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has yet to determine whether the species require more protection.

The 450-page petition details the threats to the 53 species in 45 states. It cites habitat destruction, pollution, invasive species and climate change among the main threats.

Eleven of the species on the list live in Florida, including the alligator snapping turtle, the key ringneck snake and the Florida scrub lizard.

Scientists estimate 25% of the nation's amphibians and reptiles are at risk of extinction, the petition notes. But only 67 of about 1,400 species in America protected under the Endangered Species Act are amphibians or reptiles.

One of the species on the group's petition list, the alligator snapping turtle, once thrived throughout the southeastern United States, including Florida. But recent population surveys show the turtles are now likely extirpated in Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee, with declines up to 95% over much their historic range from too much harvest and unchecked habitat degradation. Hunters still look to feed thriving world markets for the exhibition and consumption of the turtles.

"We'll move forward with a lawsuit unless they comply," Adkins Giese said. "We're hoping to get them Endangered Species Act Protection, so they'll be around for all of us to enjoy."

Florida species group wants federally protected

1. Alligator snapping turtle
2. Spotted turtle
3. Apalachicola kingsnake
4. Florida pine snake
5. Key ringneck snake
6. Rim rock crowned snake
7. Short-tailed snake
8. Southern hog-nosed snake
9. Carolina gopher frog
10. Cedar key mole skink
11. Florida scrub lizard

Source: Center for Biological Diversity