

Courthouse News Service

Greens Sue U.S. to Protect Map Turtle

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WASHINGTON (CN) - Uncle Sam is dragging its feet on protecting seven threatened species, including the Barbour's map turtle and four Great Basin springsnails that live by springs in the Nevada desert, environmentalists claim in court.

The Center for Biological Diversity claims Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Federal Court missed their deadline to respond to a petition seeking protection for the animals under the Endangered Species Act.

The center also seeks protection for the Big Blue Springs cave crayfish and the black rail.

The Center claims the Fish and Wildlife Service "issued '90-day findings' in response to the Center's petitions, which concluded that the petitions presented substantial information indicating that the listings of these seven species under the ESA 'may be warranted.'"

But the government failed to make the mandatory 12-month findings as required by federal law.

Barbour's map turtle is one of the rarest map turtles, found only in the Apalachicola River system and nearby systems in Florida, Georgia and Alabama.

Male map turtles have ridges or spikes along the center of their carapace.

"Many of the 20 remaining populations of the turtle are experiencing substantial declines from habitat loss and degradation," the complaint states. "Water pollution caused by toxic industrial discharges is causing extensive deformities and shell ulcerations, and widespread mortality of the mollusks that the turtles eat. In addition, this beautiful turtle - with its spiked shell and intricate pattern of yellow markings - suffers from overcollection for the pet trade, as well as for meat."

The Big Blue Springs Cave crayfish only lives in Florida's Jefferson, Leon and Wakulla counties at the bottom of limestone springs. The species depends on water quality and quantity for survival, and is considered to be a species of greatest conservation need by the state of Florida, the Center says.

The black rail is the smallest rail, a family of birds, in the country, and lives in the marshes of the upper Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean coasts.

"Due to many threats, it is estimated that the black rail has already declined by 75 percent," the complaint states. "Habitat degradation and fragmentation from pollution and land use continue to threaten the blackrail. Sea level rise from climate change, an emerging threat, increases storm surge and

intensity, and threatens the survival of the black rail, as its low elevation habitat will be among the first to be lost to rising sea levels.”

The Center says the four springsnail species are found at only seven or eight sites in Utah and Nevada, where their habitats are disturbed by cattle grazing and water diversion.

“Freshwater invertebrates like springsnails influence water chemistry, nutrient cycling, rates of productivity and decomposition, and are vital links in the food web.”

Groundwater development could pump away more than 57 billion gallons of water, damaging the Great Basin springs and quickly driving the four snails to extinction, the group says.

The Center wants the court to order the federal government to make the required-12 month findings on the creatures.

The Center for Biological Diversity is represented by Amy Atwood of Portland, Ore.