

# Virgin Island Free Press

## Feds Still Making A Stink About Protecting The Rare St. Croix Skink

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WASHINGTON — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said on Tuesday that the lesser Virgin Islands skink and the Florida scrub lizard may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The rare reptiles are at risk of disappearing due to development, climate change and other threats, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

“Endangered Species Act protection is the best hope of saving these little lizards from the very big threats they’re facing,” said Tierra Curry, a senior scientist at the Center. “The Act has a nearly perfect record of stopping animals from going extinct, and in the face of the global reptile and amphibian extinction crisis, it’s hands-down our best tool for saving these guys.”

The Florida scrub lizard is 5 inches long, with a gray to brown background color, spiny scales and dark-brown, longitudinal stripes on its sides; males have turquoise patches on their



throats and bellies. The species is found in four widely separated main population areas: Atlantic coast scrubs, Gulf Coast scrubs, the inland central peninsula and around the Ocala National Forest.

It lives in scrub habitat with open sandy areas for basking, foraging and nesting, near mature pine and oak trees for shade and perches. Because it is highly habitat specific, it cannot relocate to new areas when its habitat patches are destroyed. It is declining due to agriculture, urbanization, logging and mining. The total remaining population size is unknown, but the species is known to be declining as habitat is lost. Florida counties where the lizard lives include Brevard, Broward, Collier, Highland, Lake, Lee, Marion and Polk.

The Center petitioned for protection of the lizard, as well as 52 other highly imperiled amphibians and reptiles, in July 2012. Several renowned scientists and herpetologists joined the petition, including E.O. Wilson, Thomas Lovejoy and Michael Lannoo. More than 200 scientists sent a letter supporting the petition.

The Center petitioned for protection of the lesser Virgin Islands skink, along with eight other newly identified species of skinks found on Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, in February 2014. These smooth-skinned lizards are at risk of extinction due to introduced predators like mongooses and feral cats, habitat loss to development and agriculture, and sea-level rise due to global climate change. The skink can grow to be about 8 inches long. Skinks are unique among reptiles in having reproductive systems most like humans, including a placenta and live birth; they have cylindrical bodies, and most have ill-defined necks that, together with their sinuous movements and smooth, bronze-colored skin, make them look like stubby snakes.

Earlier this month a new study predicted that about 20 percent of lizard species will go extinct by the year 2080 due to global climate change. Lizards are particularly vulnerable to changes in climate because they must regulate their body temperatures by basking in the sun and cooling off in the shade; climate change will make it harder for them to find suitable patches of microhabitat.

Following today's announcement that the species may warrant protection, the Service will accept public comments and conduct a one-year review of their status and will then issue "12-month findings" determining that protection is warranted, not warranted, or "warranted but precluded," which would put the animals on the candidate waiting list for protection.

Globally nearly 1 in 4 amphibians and reptiles is at risk of dying out, scientists say. This loss is all the more alarming because lizards, frogs, snakes and salamanders play important roles as predators and prey in their ecosys-

tems and are valuable indicators of environmental health.

But Federal officials on Tuesday rejected greater protections for four species including the rabbit-like American pika, which researchers warn is disappearing from areas of the Western U.S. as climate change alters its mountain habitat.

The pika's range is shrinking across southern Utah, northeastern California and in the Great Basin that covers most of Nevada and parts of Utah, Oregon, Idaho and California, according to a U.S. Geological Survey study released last month.

Exposure to ambient temperatures of 78 degrees or higher can kill the mountain-dwelling mammals, wildlife officials say.

But the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said in documents released Tuesday that pika adapt to warmer temperatures by seeking refuge beneath rock fields in the summer. As a result, surface temperatures may not be the best predictor of population declines, the agency said.

The agency also said the most severe effects of climate change are felt at elevations below 8,200 feet (2,499 meters), which is near the lower limit of the pika's range in the West. That suggests pika habitat "has not experienced the more substantial changes" of reduced snowpack due to climate change, the wildlife service said.

Last month's Geological Survey study was not available when a student from New York petitioned the wildlife service in April to protect the animal under the Endangered Species Act, agency spokesman Brian Hires said, meaning its findings were not considered.

“We always try to use the best available science for our decisions,” Hires said.

The government denied a prior request for pika protections in 2010, saying not all populations were declining.

President Barack Obama mentioned the plight of the pika this summer when he spoke at Yosemite National Park about the damage inflicted by climate change. He said the pika was being forced further upslope at Yosemite to escape the heat.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is unlikely to pursue further action on pikas on its own, officials said, citing a heavy workload of other imperiled species.

Wildlife advocates will file a new petition in coming months to grant protections based on the Geological Survey study, said Noah Greenwald with the Center for Biological Diversity.

“The pace of determining whether species need protections is just not adequate to the task,” Greenwald said.

Wildlife officials also rejected petitions Tuesday to protect the Wyoming pocket gopher, a Caribbean iguana and the Fourche Mountain salamander of Arkansas. Further details on those decisions were not immediately available.

Officials declined to downgrade protections for two bird species in Alaska — the spectacled eider and Steller’s eider — and said the status of four species merit further review.

They are the Florida scrub lizard; the Joshua tree of Arizona, California, Utah and Nevada; an amphibian known as the lesser Virgin Islands skink; and the Lassics lupine, a flowering plant found at high elevations in the North Coast mountains of California.

For those four, the wildlife service invited scientists and others to submit information that could help the agency in its decision.