

Courthouse News Service

Darter and Turtle Creep Toward Federal Protection

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WASHINGTON (CN) — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Wednesday proposed the Sonoyta mud turtle as endangered and the pearl darter as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The Arizona turtle was classified as a candidate species in 1997, and the Mississippi fish was classified as a candidate species in 1991, but further action on their listing proposals has been stalled by other listing priorities, according to the proposals.

The Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) conservation group and its allies petitioned the agency on behalf of the turtle and the fish, along with 223 other plants and animals in May 2004.

Following lawsuits by the CBD and other groups over the agency's failure to timely address listing petitions, a court-approved six-year workplan was hammered out for the agency in a 2011 Multidistrict Litigation settlement to speed listing decisions for hundreds of species, including the turtle and darter, which have been languishing in listing limbo for many years. That workplan is winding down at the end of September.

The pearl darter, a small fish about two and a half inches long, has not been found in the Pearl River system, for which it is named, for over 40 years. The Pearl River system spans Louisiana and Mississippi. The darter's range has been reduced by 57 percent, mainly due to water pollution from sand and gravel mining, energy development activities, development and agriculture, and the fish is now found only in the Pascagoula River drainage system in southern Mississippi, according to the action.

The pearl darter is "one of the most imperiled fish species within the southeastern U.S.," the agency said, "and has been identified as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in both the Louisiana Wildlife Action Plan and the Mississippi Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy." The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (ICUN) placed it in its "endangered" Red List Category in 2013.

"Endangered Species Act protection is the best hope for saving this beautiful little fish from the very big threats it's facing," CBD senior scientist Tierra Curry, said. "Spending 25 years on a waiting list allowed the fish to be wiped out from nearly two-thirds of its range, so it's a relief that it has finally been proposed for the protection it needs to survive."

The Sonoyta mud turtle in Arizona is another freshwater species that needs ESA protection to survive. Even though these turtles are found in arid, drought-plagued and high heat areas, they spend most of their lives in water in ponds and streams. These turtles, a subspecies of the Sonoran mud turtle, are found in just five populations in southern Arizona and Sonora, Mexico just south of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The single population in the U.S. is found in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument at Quitobaquito Springs. Fossil deposits indicate that there was once a natural connection from that area to the Rio Sonoyta. The water in the Rio Sonoyta basin has been declining due to drought and groundwater pumping for agriculture and urban development, up to 92 percent from historic levels, the agency said.

“These turtles have been pushed to the brink as their aquatic habitats have been degraded and destroyed,” CBD biologist and attorney Jenny Loda, said. “I’m so happy to see Endangered Species Act protection for these turtles move forward after an almost 20-year wait. With dry conditions in the desert expected to worsen with climate change, the Act is hands down our best tool for saving these guys.”

Comments and information on the listing proposals are due by Nov. 21, and requests for public hearings must be submitted by Nov. 7.