

Feds reject boreal toad endangered listing; Utah to keep up conservation efforts

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Boreal toads will need to continue hopping along without help from the federal government.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Thursday its decision not to list the eastern boreal toad on the endangered species list. The decision applies to most boreal toad populations in Utah, as well as populations found in Colorado, Idaho, New Mexico and Wyoming. It does not apply to boreal toad populations found in the Grouse Creek area of western Box Elder County, which were not under endangered species consideration due to slight genetic differences.

Boreal toad populations throughout the West, however, have experienced an alarming collapse. The culprit largely include the fungus-caused disease, called chytrid, which has wiped out amphibians throughout the world.



Aquatics biologist Cody Edwards holds a juvenile boreal toad in the Monte Cristo Range on Thursday, July 12, 2017. One of the main ways that researchers determine the health of boreal toad habitat is by looking for a good mix of tadpoles, juveniles and adult toads.

However, many biologists say climate change and habitat destruction are bigger factors taking a toll on the boreal toad in Utah.

Nevertheless, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service said it “anticipates the eastern population will continue to maintain self-sustaining populations across its range for the next 50 years.”

“We’re definitely disappointed to see the decision,” said Jenny Loda, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.

The center originally petitioned an endangered listing for boreal toads back in 2011. They’re still reviewing documents and methods used by the wildlife service, deciding whether to appeal the decision.

“As far as I can tell, it seems the species has disappeared from quite a bit of its range and even where it is still hanging on, it tends to be in smaller population sizes,” Loda said.

The wildlife service acknowledged some disappearance during its assessment. According to its Species Status Assessment Report, of the eastern boreal toads’ 439 known historic breeding sites, only 194 are considered occupied.

Loda said she’s still reviewing the document, but she criticized the assessment for mostly focusing on chytrid infections, instead of considering other threats like habitat loss and only “briefly” mentioning climate change. She also said considering the toads’ future on a 50-year timescale was too shortsighted.

“Things like climate change could cause more havoc with chytrid fungus,” she said. “There might be areas where its presence is fairly low, but things like temperature change can impact survival of the fungus itself. There are always other factors that come into play, in terms of toads being able to resist the disease ... I’m not sure whether that was taken into account.”

An endangered listing could have impacted grazing and recreation activities in many of Utah’s popular mountain areas, like the Monte Cristo Range and the Uintah Mountains.

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Sara Seegert, a native aquatics species coordinator with the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, said the state will continue monitoring boreal toad populations and improve the amphibian’s habitat.

The toads are still considered a state sensitive species.

“We have a conservation plan and strategy in place,” Seegert said. “Implementing that plan is one of the reasons that helped support boreal toad populations and prevent them from being listed.”

Seegert said she doesn’t have any major concerns about boreal toads’ future survival in Utah.

“Right now we have a pretty good handle on what the threats are, as far as diseases and habitat loss or degradation,” she said. “As long as we keep track of what’s going on, we’re going to continue to see good, healthy populations of boreal toads. And (populations) will improve, hopefully.”

The wildlife service had a deadline at the end of September to make endangered species listing decisions on 62 species. To date, 29 species have been rejected, 10 received protections and seven decisions were delayed, according to the Center for Biological Diversity.

Rejected species include charismatic animals, like the Pacific walrus, to lesser-known critters like springsnails in the Great Basin.

As Center for Biological Diversity staff combs through the decision documents, Loda said she’ll be looking for any evidence that the decisions were politically motivated.

“Definitely the Trump administration has not been very friendly toward the Endangered Species Act, including (Secretary of the Interior Ryan) Zinke,” Loda said.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is an agency under the Department of Interior. As the department's chief, Zinke has come under fire lately for deteriorating morale in his agencies. He allegedly tried to force the resignations of some of his top science and policy staff.

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is really under-resourced and underfunded. We need Congress to give them more money," Loda said. "So many species need protection and even species that are protected don't have enough funds going toward their recovery."

She said she hopes states like Utah will continue to step up and protect the unique plants and animals living within their borders.

"They have made good efforts so far ... hopefully we can at least have that continuing," Loda said. "Hopefully there will be state funding for recovery efforts."