

U.S. Fish and Wildlife denies Endangered Species Act protection for eastern hellbenders

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ASHEVILLE – Just as the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has called on the public to help locate and document sightings of the declining population of eastern hellbender salamanders to help in recovery efforts, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided not to list the salamander as an endangered species.

The federal wildlife agency, which works under the Endangered Species Act to list plant and animal species on the brink of extinction, on April 3 denied ESA listing for the eastern hellbender, the largest aquatic salamander in North America, calling it good news, while conservation groups are criticizing the decision as short sighted.

The prehistoric-looking amphibian can grow up to 2 feet long and is found in pristine, fast-moving rivers and streams in the Western North Carolina mountains, spending much of its time under large, flat rocks.



Hellbenber salamanders, sometimes known as "water dogs" or "snot otters" are in serious decline across Western North Carolina. (Photo: Courtesy of Lori Williams/NCWRC)

Because hellbenders breathe through their skin, they are sensitive to poor water quality and are considered a "bioindicator," or a species that can tell biologists about degrading environmental conditions when conditions first start changing, said Lori Williams, wildlife diversity biologist with the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.

Hellbenders are listed on North Carolina's endangered species list as a species of special concern, which makes it illegal to take, possess, transport or sell a hellbender or to attempt to do so. A violation is a Class 1 misdemeanor, which can result in a fine and up to 120 days in jail.

Hellbenders were once common in the mountains but have disappeared throughout much of their habitat mainly due to declining water quality and habitat degradation, Williams said. They have also been purposely killed by anglers who mistakenly think that hellbenders decrease trout populations, she said, which is a myth.

Eastern hellbenders have been protected in North Carolina since 1990, Williams said.

“We will continue operating as usual with population monitoring, research, education and outreach, and stream restoration, among other conservation efforts. (Not being federally listed) doesn’t change anything we are doing or will do,” Williams said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife decision ‘good news’?

In its hellbender decision, the Fish and Wildlife Service said that most populations of the eastern hellbender are not in danger of extinction and therefore do not warrant listing under the Endangered Species Act. This includes the hellbender across its southeastern range of North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi and Tennessee.

The FWS does, however, propose listing the eastern hellbender population in Missouri as an endangered distinct population segment. This proposal is open to public comment for 60 days, but the decision not to list the eastern hellbender is final, said Gary Peeples, spokesman for the Fish and Wildlife Service field office in Asheville.

“Overall, we’re disappointed with this decision. We don’t think it goes far enough,” said Ben Prater, Southeast program director for the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife.

Defenders of Wildlife believes hellbenders are in such peril due to habitat loss and destruction, that in 2017 the group launched the Southeastern Hellbender Conservation Initiative. Its mission, working with universities, government agencies, conservation groups and landowners, is to use science, education, community outreach and on-the-ground habitat restoration to advance hellbender population recovery on private lands.

The Center for Biological Diversity took criticism of the FWS decision a step further. The national conservation nonprofit, along with the Dogwood Alliance and other conservation groups, originally petitioned to protect the eastern hellbender under the Endangered Species Act in 2010.

The April 3 decision to deny the petition came after two legal settlements the Center entered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2011 and 2013 to expedite protections.

“It flagrantly ignores the reality of the hellbender’s dire situation and gives these imperiled animals a big shove toward extinction,” Elise Bennett, a Center for Biological Diversity attorney working to protect reptiles and amphibians, said in a statement.

She said 78% of historically known hellbender populations have disappeared or are in decline. The salamanders face threats from chemical pollution and sedimentation caused by development, deforestation and dams.

The hellbender is particularly vulnerable to water contamination because of its permeable skin and sensitive eggs, which it lays in water.

Peeples said that in making its determination, the FWS takes a broad-range view of the specie. The agency relied on information gathered by the N.C. Wildlife Commission and other state agencies across the range of the hellbender to get a nationwide look at how the species is faring.

“One key thing we look at is not so much what is the absolute grand total of the population, but how many populations do we know about, and in this situation, what are the trends in those populations – are they increasing or decreasing?” Peeples said.

Eastern hellbenders range across 15 states, from Missouri to Alabama to New York.

Being placed on the federal Endangered Species List opens up resources that can be used for hellbender conservation, like grant money for research or for stream restoration projects. It also means that harming a hellbender would become a federal crime under the Endangered Species Act, and it prohibits the federal government from making a plant or animal go extinct.

Not being placed on the Endangered Species List, however, does not mean it doesn’t need conservation, Peeples said.

“The hellbender is not at the point where it’s facing such dire circumstances, so I think that’s something to celebrate in WNC,” Peeples said.

“The conserved habitat in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Pisgah and Nantahala national forests, that does a lot to help conserve hellbender in WNC, as well as the efforts of N.C. Wildlife Commission,” he said.

“Their conservation efforts are still extremely important to make sure the hellbender doesn’t need to be put on the Endangered Species List down the road.”

What to do if you spot a hellbender

Leave it alone but note the physical location or GPS coordinates, take a photo, if possible, and email that information to Williams at lori.williams@ncwildlife.org.

If anglers catch a hellbender on hook and line, carefully remove the hook if it is safe to do so without harming the animal or cut the line as close as possible and return it back to the water or call the Wildlife Interaction Helpline at 866-318-2401.

Learn more by visiting the Commission’s hellbender webpage.