



ENDANGERED SPECIES

Greens, Interior settle Shasta salamander suit

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Conservationists reached a settlement with the Interior Department requiring the agency to determine whether salamanders that would be imperiled by a proposed dam raise in Northern California should qualify for Endangered Species Act protections.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued Interior in November over a renewed bid by the agency to raise Shasta Dam by 18.5 feet.

CBD says raising the more than 600-foot dam would inundate critical habitat for three imperiled salamander species.

It has sought ESA protections since 2012. Last November, the group sued.

When CBD first petitioned to have the salamander listed, it was regarded as a single species. Last year, however, research suggested it is three distinct salamander species, each about 4 inches long with a dark, reddish brown color: the Shasta salamander, the Samwel Shasta salamander and the Wintu Shasta salamander.

The settlement requires the Fish and Wildlife Service to assess the species by April 30, 2021, potentially complicating Trump administration efforts to raise the dam to store more water for farmers.

“Endangered Species Act protection is essential to preventing the extinction of these unique salamanders,” Jenny Loda, a CBD biologist and attorney, said in a statement. “Renewed efforts to raise the level of Shasta dam would destroy the salamanders’ habitat, so they desperately need these lifesaving safeguards.”

Shasta Dam impounds California’s largest reservoir, storing water that is shuttled south to cities and farms.

Agricultural groups that receive water from the federal Central Valley Project — including the politically powerful Westlands Water District — have long pushed for raising the dam and expanding the reservoir.

Environmentalists had thought the project was dead because enlarging the reservoir would flood part of the McCloud River, which is protected under the state’s wild and scenic rivers law. The state has said it opposes the \$1.3 billion project and considers it illegal.

The Trump administration and Congress, however, have breathed new life into the project. Congress appropriated \$20 million toward pre-construction activities last spring in an omnibus spending bill, and it appeared in Interior memos and an executive order last year that would streamline the environmental review for such projects (Greenwire, Oct. 22, 2018).