



Enviros sue for salamanders' habitat

Michael Doyle, E&E News reporter
Published: Monday, June 3, 2019

An environmental group today sued the Fish and Wildlife Service for failing to designate critical habitat for the Georgetown salamander and Salado salamander, which are both protected under the Endangered Species Act.

In a lawsuit filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, the Center for Biological Diversity asserted the federal agency has badly missed ESA deadlines.

"Pollution and sprawl are destroying the springs these salamanders need to survive, so federal officials have to safeguard their habitat before it's too late," Elise Bennett, a center attorney, said in a statement.

The lawsuit marks the latest twist in the salamanders' somewhat meandering tale.

The Georgetown salamander is known for three pairs of bright-red gills on each side behind the jaws, among other traits.

The Salado salamander's upper body is "generally grayish-brown with a slight cinnamon tinge and an irregular pattern of tiny, light flecks," FWS explains.

In August 2012, FWS proposed listing the two Texas species as endangered and designating 1,031 acres of spring and cave habitat for the Georgetown salamander and 372 acres of spring habitat for the Salado salamander.

The primary threats to the species include reduced water quality and quantity from urbanization, the disturbance of springs, climate change, and inadequate regulations concerning groundwater and stormwater management, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

Critical habitat includes specific areas with physical or biological features "essential to the conservation of the species." Under the law, FWS is required "to the maximum extent prudent and determinable" to designate critical habitat for a species "concurrently with making a determination" that it is endangered or threatened.

The proposed action was never finalized. Instead, in February 2014, FWS listed both salamanders as threatened but did not designate critical habitat for either species (Greenwire, Feb. 24, 2014).

"The Endangered Species Act can provide lifesaving habitat protections for these imperiled salamanders, but only if the Service complies with its mandates," the lawsuit states.

Among some property owners and others, though, concerns arose over ESA protections for the salamanders, with one resident of Georgetown, Texas, stating during public comments that “if the salamander is placed on the endangered list, our future will be greatly hurt.”

FWS noted in 2014 that “all 17 of the known Georgetown salamander locations are within the City of Georgetown’s jurisdiction for residential and commercial development.”