



Salamanders face extinction from plans to raise Shasta Dam

by Adam Robinson
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REDDING, Calif. — Three species of Shasta Salamanders are being threatened by plans to raise the height of the Shasta Dam, which would result in flooding of their habitat.

On Wednesday, the Center for Biological Diversity and Environmental Protection Information Center secured a new settlement that will speed up the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decision on whether the salamanders warrant Endangered Species Act protection.

The agency is now required to make that decision by April 30, 2021.

In a petition in 2012 from the Center, the Fish and Wildlife Service determined that the Shasta salamander may warrant protection. However, since that time, the salamanders were recognized by scientists as belonging to three distinct species, each of which is rare and imperiled. All three live in the vicinity of Shasta Lake.

Endangered Species Act protection is essential to preventing the extinction of these unique salamanders,” said Jenny Loda, a Center biologist and attorney working to protect vulnerable amphibians and reptiles. “Renewed efforts to raise the level of Shasta Dam would destroy the salamanders’ habitat, so they desperately need these lifesaving safeguards.

Congress allocated \$30 million to raising the dam in 2018 and preconstruction work started shortly afterward. The Bureau of Reclamation plans to award a construction contract in December 2019 and complete construction of the project by February 2024.

In addition to direct flooding from the raised dam, habitat for Shasta salamanders and other rare species are likely to be affected by the relocation or modification of infrastructure needed to accommodate the larger reservoir, such as buildings, roads, bridges, and utility lines.

Endangered Species Act protections would give the Shasta salamanders a real shot at survival,” said Tom Wheeler, executive director of the Environmental Protection Information Center.

“With a near-perfect record at saving the species it protects from extinction, the Endangered Species Act is our best hope for keeping these rare creatures in the world.

“Shasta salamanders are 4 inches long and dark reddish-brown. Their restricted range, coupled with ongoing threats of habitat

destruction and degradation, leaves them extremely vulnerable to extinction.”

“The recently described Samwel Shasta salamander was named for its original discovery site, Samwel Cave, and the Wintu Shasta salamander is named for the original habitats of the region, the Winnemem Wintu tribe.

All three species are found within a range of about 330 square miles in the vicinity of Shasta Lake.