



REUTERS

Activists may sue after Texas highway project digs up salamander habitat

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Reuters) - Two environmental groups said on Thursday they will sue the U.S. government and state of Texas because work on a federally funded highway project near Austin is putting two endangered salamander species at risk.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Save Our Springs Alliance in a letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Texas Department of Transportation said there is a high risk polluted water could enter habitats for the endangered Austin blind and Barton Springs salamanders.

Of particular concern for the groups is a section of the project known as the MoPac Intersections encroaching on underground caves, sink holes and other terrain features where the salamanders live.

According to the environmental groups, Texas' highway department did not adequately consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service regarding the MoPac Intersections project and how it could affect the salamanders before authorizing it in violation of the Endangered Species Act.

The two groups said they intend to sue within 60 days if the state highway agency and federal agency do not consult each other regarding how to protect the salamanders.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and the Texas Department of Transportation were not available for comment.

Collette Adkins, a lawyer with the Center for Biological Diversity, told Reuters that Texas' highway department has not taken measures to prevent polluted water from seeping into the voids and harming the two species.

"They're supposed to cover them and put barriers like straw bales around them to stop runoff," Adkins said. "We're also concerned people may come out and just start messing around."

Kelly Davis, a lawyer with Save Our Springs Alliance, added that the Austin blind and Barton Springs salamanders are already at risk from the "unchecked sprawl" in and around Austin.

The metro area of the Lone Star state's capital has been growing dramatically, expanding its population by more than 34 percent between 2007 and 2017, according to the Austin Chamber of Commerce.