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Environmental groups seek federal protection for La. turtle species

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NEW ORLEANS -- Environmental groups are suing the Trump administration, accusing it of failing to protect two freshwater turtle species found only in Louisiana and Mississippi.

A lawsuit filed today by the Center for Biological Diversity and Healthy Gulf in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia says Pearl River and Pascagoula map turtles should be protected under the Endangered Species Act. Several groups petitioned to have the turtles listed under the act in 2010, but the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has yet to decide on their status.

The government's "slow approach" has allowed environmentally damaging dredging and damming practices in and near the Pearl River, said Andrew Whitehurst, Healthy Gulf's water program director. The proposed "One Lake" dam project in Mississippi's Rankin and Hinds counties is an especially dire threat for the Pearl River map turtle and its habitat, according to the center.

The turtles are also harmed by trapping, pollution and habitat loss. Their habit of lining up on fallen trees make them a common target for gun enthusiasts.

"They need safeguards before it's too late," said Jason Totoiu, a center attorney.

Also known as "sawbacks" for the ridges topping their shells, Pearl River map turtles are considered one of the least-studied turtles in North America. Females are known to grow up to a foot long and live 30 years.

The wildlife service has not made a decision on the turtles' ESA status partly because there's some debate over whether the turtles are two separate species or whether they're variations of another species. According to the center, recent studies define the Pearl River and Pascagoula map turtles as distinct species.

The Pearl River map turtle population appears to have fallen below the level of other turtle species that are protected by the ESA. A 2016 report by the U.S. Geological Survey says the ESA-listed ringed map turtle was more abundant than the Pearl River map turtle, which has been found in St. Tammany and Washington parishes.

"Very little is known about the natural history and ecology of the species, which will make conservation efforts challenging," the USGS report said.

The Pascagoula map turtle has a relatively small range in the Pascagoula river system in Mississippi