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Albany law students seek to put bumblebees on endangered species list

[Rick Karlin](#)

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2



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A group of Albany law school students has joined a national effort to get the American bumblebee added to the Endangered Species List.

Lori Van Buren

- ALBANY — A group of Albany law school students has joined a national effort to get the American bumblebee added to the Endangered Species List.

Law professor Keith Hirokawa and 14 students calling themselves the Bombus Pollinators Association of Law Students, or BPALS, have filed a petition to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for the listing which is based on the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

They are filing with the Center for Biological Diversity, a national organization devoted to maintaining species that are at risk of extinction.

The law students' work began in 2019 during Hirokawa's Environmental Law class and have been working with the Arizona-based Center on the project for almost a year.

"This was a fantastic experience. Law school can feel so abstract, and removed from the work we will be doing as lawyers. Having the opportunity to engage in real world work is an enormous gift, and a wonderful chance to gain unique experience into the different roles an attorney can play," one of the students, Claire Burke '21, said. She is president of the school's Environmental Law Society and of BPALS.

[Bumble Bee Petition Center Et Al 2021 Petition to List the American Bumble Bee](#) by [rkarlin](#) on Scribd

The American bumblebee is a general pollinator that visits a variety of plants for gathering nectar and pollinating.

Loss of the American bumblebee would have serious consequences to American ecology and economics, according to the students and the Center.

During the last two decades, habitat loss, pesticides, disease, climate change, and competition from honey bees have contributed to an 89 percent decline in relative abundance. That's a measurement of how common the species is relative to others throughout a given area.

"It is our hope that the Biden administration grasps the gravity of this moment," Hirokawa said.

Bumblebees in New York have suffered a "catastrophic decline" of 99 percent in relative abundance, according to experts at the Center.

"We're asking President Biden to be the hero that steps up and saves the American bumblebee from extinction," said Jess Tyler, an entomologist and staff scientist at the Center. "It's unthinkable that we would carelessly allow this fuzzy, black-and-yellow beauty to disappear forever."

First described when the United States was a British colony, American bumblebees are known by their distinctive black-and-yellow, furry color pattern. They're social insects who live in colonies that can number in the hundreds, with workers and a single queen.

They make their nests in pre-existing cavities like rodent burrows and rotten logs, or on the surface of the ground in large grass bunches.

“It’s unfortunate that we’re forced to call upon the Endangered Species Act to protect a species so fundamental to human and ecosystem health,” said Hirokawa.

The bee is a foraging generalist that provides essential pollination services for a wide variety of plants, native and cultivated, across its vast range. Its largest remaining populations are in the southern Great Plains and Southeast, but the bees are also found in Southwestern deserts and historically as far north as North Dakota and Maine.

The loss of such a wide-ranging and adaptable bee would have considerable consequences for entire ecosystems and crop production.

The species’ decline has been driven by multiple threats. Habitat loss has limited nutrition from diverse nectar sources and led to weakened immune systems. Pesticides also have hurt immune systems and reproduction abilities.

New York State has taken some [actions](#) to protect the bumblebee population.

But a national endangered designation would make it easier to protect habitat for the bees. According to the petition, bumblebees thrive in the same habitat that hosts Karner blue butterflies, such as the Albany Pine Bush area.

It also might foster tougher regulations such as screening requirements on domesticated or greenhouse bees which are used for commercial plant cultivation. These bees pose a threat to the wild American bumblebees by spreading mites, fungus and diseases.