

Lawsuit aims to force federal action before the Pearl River's namesake fish goes extinct

- [BY TRISTAN BAURICK | Staff writer](#)
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The Pearl darter hasn't been found in its namesake, the Pearl River, in nearly 50 years. It was granted endangered species status in 2017, but federal wildlife officials haven't done enough to preserve its remaining habitat, a lawsuit claims.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Dams and pollution long ago stripped the Pearl River of its namesake fish, the [Pearl darter](#).

An environmental group says the endangered fish could be reintroduced one day, but the federal government must first protect its remaining hideaways — a few creeks and stretches of smaller rivers in Mississippi — before there are no more darters to put back in the Pearl.

“The fact that the Pearl River’s namesake fish no longer lives in the river really tells the story of the extinction crisis in North America,” said Tierra Curry, a scientist with the [Center for Biological Diversity](#).

This week, the center announced its intent to sue the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service](#) for what it calls the agency’s failure to designate critical habitat for the tiny, bottom-dwelling fish more than three years after the agency [added it to the list of protected wildlife](#) under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Fish and Wildlife also hasn’t developed a recovery plan for the fish, a step that, along with protecting habitat, is the usual course of action after a species is declared endangered.

During President Donald Trump’s recently concluded administration, the agency was unusually inactive, Curry noted.

“They’ve listed just 25 species under the ESA during the past four years,” she said. “That’s a record low for any administration since endangered species protections began.”

The Pearl darter is a 2.5-inch-long, snub-nosed fish that typically hides among riverbottom rocks to pounce on insects and tiny crustaceans. Found only in the fresh waters of east Louisiana and Mississippi, its already-limited range has shrunk by about half in recent decades. Scientists say it's been nearly 50 years since the darter has been spotted in the 444-mile-long Pearl River, which starts in central Mississippi and runs past St. Tammany and Washington parishes, forming Louisiana's eastern border.

The darter's disappearance from the Pearl is largely the result of the Ross Barnett Reservoir near Jackson and small dams that regulate water flows into the West Pearl Navigation Waterway, according to Tulane University biologist and darter researcher [Hank Bart](#). The reservoir and dams block fish migration to upstream spawning areas.

“There’s the impact from pollution from pulp and paper mills and the oil and gas (industry), but ultimately it was the dams that caused the Pearl darter’s demise,” Bart said. “There’s just no way they could get past them.”

The darter is now confined to a few scattered locations in Mississippi’s Pascagoula River Basin, where it faces increasing threats from pollution, in-stream gravel mining and dams, according to the center.

“Once it’s gone from the Pascagoula, that’ll be the demise of the species,” Bart said.

The Pearl darter was listed as endangered in late 2017, during Trump’s first year in office and after a lengthy review process that started in 1999.

The ESA has protected hundreds of species since it was passed by Congress in 1973. The act is credited with the recovery of several iconic species, including the brown pelican, American alligator, Louisiana black bear and bald eagle.

The number of listings peaked under President Bill Clinton, with 521 species added during two terms, an average of 65 per year. Second lowest after Trump was President George W. Bush, whose administration listed 60 species over eight years.

While Fish and Wildlife recently declared “the conservation of imperiled species” a “hallmark of the Trump Administration,” the Center for Biological Diversity says simply listing species under the ESA isn’t enough. That action has to be followed by plans and policies, steps the Trump administration spent years avoiding, effectively nullifying the darter’s endangered status.

“With protection, the ultimate goal is recovery,” Curry said. “And (the Trump administration) wasn’t supporting that.”

Curry is “incredibly hopeful” the new administration of President Joe Biden will be a strong backer of the ESA and help tackle “a whole backlog” of species awaiting consideration for listing. The center could withdraw its lawsuit if Fish and Wildlife takes concrete steps in the coming weeks.

Saving the darter in Mississippi is one thing, but reviving its population in the Pearl River presents bigger challenges.

“You can’t do it without removing dams,” Bart said.

Many of the smaller dams no longer serve their intended purpose of regulating flows for industrial navigation, but they are favored by recreational boaters and anglers. Efforts to remove dams in the Pearl basin have gotten little traction.

The darter isn’t the only species struggling in the Pearl. The basin is also home to the endangered Gulf sturgeon and the Pearl River map turtle, which is teetering on the brink of extinction and is the [focus of another legal fight](#). Other fish, including the [river redhorse](#) sucker, haven’t been seen in the Pearl in years and likely won’t return.

“The Pearl darter is a bellwether for what happens to rivers when we alter them and don’t restore them,” Bart said. “That species’ fate is a direct result of what we’ve done to the Pearl River, and it could be the fate of many other species.”