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# Push for congress to increase Endangered Species Act funding could help local wildlife

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Several iconic local species stand to benefit from [a letter sent to Congress on Tuesday](#) asking that the federal budget for endangered species protections be more than doubled for Fiscal Year 2022, from last year's \$291.7 million to \$592.1 million. 170 different environmental groups signed on to the request, which was led by the [Center for Biological Diversity](#).

They say that \$592.1 million is the sum needed to "make up for lost ground and address the threat of climate change to biodiversity."

"The Endangered Species Act is one of the best tools we have to stem the current wildlife extinction crisis, yet it has been chronically underfunded for decades," the letter begins. "While Congress provided a modest increase for the [U.S. Fish and Wildlife] Service in Fiscal Year 2021, it fell woefully short of what is required to meet the needs of our most imperiled animals and plants."

More than 1,600 species are currently protected within the United States under the terms of the Endangered Species Act, but rising numbers of reports from scientists indicate an extinction crisis is underway, and that likely many more species warrant protection than currently have it. [Scientific evidence indicates](#) that recent elevated rates of extinction documented across the globe are the result of increased human activity causing impacts like habitat conversion, the spread of invasive species, pollution and climate change that are difficult for most species to adapt to within their lifetimes.

"The science is clear: species are being lost faster than ever before in human history," said Jacob Malcom, director of the Center for Conservation Innovation at Defenders of Wildlife, [in a press release issued Tuesday](#). "The science also shows what works to save species: funding. We urge

Congress to fully fund the ESA so that the most vulnerable species have a fighting chance at survival and recovery.”

One major issue these conservation groups point to [in their letter](#) to Congress is the uneven allocation of funds across species, with hundreds of plants and animals receiving less than \$1000 a year for their recovery. In [a separate document](#) compiled by the Center for Biological Diversity, the organization calculated that, in 2014, more than 60% of total spending on endangered species was allocated to just 35 different animals (no plants). The letter issued Tuesday requests that a minimum of \$50,000 in funds be allocated to ensuring the recovery of every listed species.

The threatened Mojave desert tortoise was the only local representative on that list of 35 highly-funded species. This long-lived reptile ranked 9th in 2014, with more than \$33 million in United States Fish and Wildlife Service funds dedicated to its recovery.

Protection of the Mojave desert tortoise locally has been controversial, owing in part to Washington County officials' support of the Northern Corridor Highway, a 4-lane, 4.5-mile bypass road that would cut through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area, designated in 2009 [specifically for the protection of this species](#). The project [was approved late in the Trump administration](#) but conservation groups have vowed to renew their efforts to fight it with appeals to the new officials under President Biden.

Although much of the rest of the list of highly-funded species is made up of various fish species, it does not include the two locally endangered fishes, the Virgin River Chub and the Woundfin. Steve Meismer, local coordinator of the [Virgin River Program](#), which coordinates various agencies for the protection of Washington County's Virgin River ecosystem, said that an increase in funding would certainly help with local efforts to ensure these species survive and continue to contribute to local environmental health.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to continue this support as we work with increasing costs and flat USFWS and State budgets for nearly two decades," Meismer said. "In response we have trimmed and reduced the activities we can accomplish with our budgets to achieve recovery actions necessary to support the endangered species that we deal with. An example is that we have been limited in our ability to acquire available property for habitat or river ecology, public outreach, habitat restoration efforts, cooperative projects with landowners and other entities to benefit the environment."

Meismer revealed that, even though a 2002 agreement allocated \$730,000 in annual funding to the Virgin River Program from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, they have only actually received between \$350,000 and \$460,000 from that agency "for the last 6 years or so." The Virgin River Program also receives financial support from the Washington County Water Conservancy District and the Utah Division of Natural Resources per that 2002 agreement.

With this dramatically reduced budget, Meismer is also charged with recovery of the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, a local endangered bird species. He is hopeful that increased funding from Congress may enable the Virgin River Program to resume some of the activities he deems necessary for these species recoveries to be a success.

Other local listed species include the Siler pincushion cactus, [a population of which was removed from a plot](#) of Utah School and Institutional Trust Land Administration property designated for development last October. The species is difficult to propagate and grows only on gypsiferous soil types found in southern Utah and northern Arizona. Scientists estimate that fewer than ten thousand individuals of the species remain, so a boost in federal funding could likely aid its persistence through habitat acquisition and transplantation efforts.

Christian Venhuizen, spokesperson for the Utah Color Country District Bureau of Land Management, said that agency has put more than \$400,000 toward recovery of local listed plant and animal species over the past three years, in addition to investments in staff time, equipment and vehicles, volunteers and other resources funded from other sources. Bolstering the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's federal budget to aid in this work could make a difference for our regional biodiversity.

"The effort to responsibly manage the land for multiple uses through hard work, dedication, innovation and sound science means a lasting balance for America's public lands to benefit current and future generations," Venhuizen said.