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Lawsuit alleges federal government failed to protect rare L.A. fish species

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An Unarmored Threespine Stickleback (California Department of Fish and Wildlife photo by R. Barabe)

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The Center for Biological Diversity on Monday, Jan. 18, announced a lawsuit against the Trump administration for failing to prepare an updated recovery plan or take other urgent steps to preserve Southern California's unarmored threespine stickleback, a tiny scaleless fish known for its elaborate mating rituals.

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"These little fish have survived for millennia in Los Angeles-area streams, but the Trump administration's inaction has helped push these living icons of California to the brink," said J.P. Rose, a center attorney. "Habitat destruction and water pollution are wiping them out. Without immediate and ambitious new safeguards, these fish will be relegated to history books and museums."

Conservationists say that even though the species was protected under the Endangered Species Act more than 50 years ago, stickleback populations are increasingly threatened by habitat destruction, water pollution, groundwater withdrawals, wildfire and non-native predators.

A recovery plan was created in 1985 for the stickleback, but it did not satisfy the requirements of the Endangered Species Act, according to the center.

"Although the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service acknowledged in 2009 that the 1985 plan does not reflect the best available science, it has not prepared an updated plan," according to a center statement. "The recovery plan also does not address how climate change may impact the stickleback."

The Fish and Wildlife Service is required to prepare an updated status review every five years, but has not prepared one since 2009, according to the center.

Male sticklebacks are the nest builders and engage in an elaborate "dance" to woo females. Once a female accepts a male's overtures and deposits her eggs in the nest, the male unceremoniously ejects the female.

"Katy Perry's 'Hot N Cold' may be about an up-and-down human relationship, but it also echoes the strange world of stickleback romance. 'You're yes then you're no; you're in then you're out,'" Rose said. "These distinctive little creatures are an important part of Southern California's biodiversity, and we've got to protect them."

The species was historically present in the Los Angeles, Santa Ana and San Gabriel Rivers, but by 1985 the fish were limited mostly to a small portion of the upper Santa Clara River drainage in northwestern Los Angeles County and a small area in the San Antonio Creek drainage in Santa Barbara County.

Since 1985, a single new population of stickleback has been discovered in Bouquet Creek, but two known populations have been wiped out, according to the center.

A 2015 study found the fish at “high risk of extinction,” and surveys did not identify stickleback in areas where they were abundant in previous years.

The male threespine stickleback establishes a territory that he vigorously protects, builds a nest in the sand, and, after cementing the nest materials together with mucus threads spun from his kidneys, burrows through the nest to make an exit and entrance. When the nest is ready, he searches for a female carrying eggs and swims near her in a zigzag, dancing motion.

If the female is attracted, she follows him to his nest, where she deposits her eggs. The male immediately fertilizes the eggs and drives the female away. Over the course of the breeding season, he may entice other females into his nest, as well. Males protect both eggs and fry from predators. Incubation time averages six to eight days.