

Federal agency takes next step in listing Central Texas salamanders as endangered

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As officials with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Tuesday finalized a proposal to add four Central Texas salamander species to the endangered species list — a move that would curb development on 5,983 acres in three counties — Williamson County's environmental program director stood before commissioners and evoked a scene from the World War II movie "A Bridge Too Far."

In the scene, a lieutenant general readies his troops for battle. In Williamson County, Gary Boyd was preparing commissioners for the proposal, which officials have fought since August 2011.

"This is a story you will tell your grandchildren," Boyd quoted.

The federal announcement, which was made within minutes of Boyd's presentation to the court, marked a significant win for environmentalists who have made a national push for U.S. Fish and Wildlife to act on hundreds of candidates for the endangered species list, including the four Central Texas salamander species.

The proposal kicks off the final stage before listing the Austin Blind, Salado, Georgetown and Jollyville Plateau salamanders as needing protection under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Various Williamson County landowners and elected officials have fought the listing, which they say will hinder development in the growing county. U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Round Rock, and U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, both introduced federal legislation to block funds that would support the listing.

"Instead of hastily proposing these listings based on limited data, the administration should allow conservation efforts underway to continue without hindering Central Texas from creating jobs," Cornyn said Tuesday in a statement. "We'll press forward with our efforts to block this foolish plan."

Carter told the American-Statesman in an interview Tuesday that he will continue to oppose the listing.

"I think we've got a good group together to make this fight," he said.

The nonprofit Williamson County Conservation Foundation, a noncounty agency, and the Texas Salamander Coalition, a group of private landowners, have pumped hundreds of thousands of dollars into salamander research, hoping to disprove the federal claim that development poses a threat to the salamanders. So far, they say the studies have turned up information to show the salamanders are doing well.

That information will probably be presented to U.S. Fish and Wildlife during the 60-day comment period. Two public hearings are scheduled next month. The agency also will conduct a study to determine the economic effect of protecting the critical habitat.

The designation would not automatically affect private landowners or necessarily prevent private development in the area. However, should a development threaten the salamanders, it might be stopped, and the rules might affect infrastructure for developments.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife said the designation would prohibit federal actions, such as road construction or

work by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, that would probably destroy or adversely modify the critical habitat for the four salamander species.

Williamson County officials said Tuesday that they fear land could be tainted by the critical habitat designation, as developers could be hesitant to buy and build on protected land. A final decision on whether to list the salamanders is due within a year.

In making the proposal for the endangered listing, federal biologists considered data gathered by various sources, including the City of Austin. They agreed with environmentalists, saying the species need protection because of rapid development and the resulting effect on water quality in the area. The proposal said degraded water quality and disturbed spring sites are the primary threats to the four salamander species.

"Water quality degradation in salamander habitat has been cited as the top concern in several studies ... because these salamanders spend their entire life cycle in water," the proposal said.

The Austin-based Save Our Springs Alliance and the national nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity have pushed for an accelerated, emergency listing.

"These are canaries in the aquifer," SOS President Bill Bunch said. "If we protect these species, we're protecting the water supply for sustainable use and enjoyment for people and a whole range of other species."

Alisa Shull, a supervisory biologist with U.S. Fish and Wildlife, said that if the salamanders make the list, a recovery plan would be developed to address threats to the species and "get it to a point where we could ideally get it off the list."

Shull said it's still too early to say what such a plan would entail, but the endangered listing would ensure the species and their habitats could not be harmed.

"If someone was doing something to habitat that resulted in death of the (salamanders), it would be a violation of the Endangered Species Act," Shull said.

The agency now proposes to designate 120 acres in Travis County as critical habitat for the Austin blind salamander, 4,460 acres in Travis and Williamson counties for the Jollyville Plateau salamander, 1,031 acres in Williamson County for the Georgetown salamander, and 372 acres in Bell County for the Salado salamander.

The county's conservation foundation has spent or committed more than \$650,000 on studies, hoping to show the species are not actually endangered.

"We have expended a great deal of effort to build a case that says there is no scientific justification at this time to list them," Boyd said.

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