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Feds To Review Status of Rio Grande Cutthroat Trout

Associated Press

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service plans to review the status of the Rio Grande cutthroat trout to determine if the fish should be a candidate for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The agency announced its plans Tuesday in the Federal Register, saying it will make a determination by April 2008 based on the results of the status review. Comments will be accepted through July 6.

This is the second time the Fish and Wildlife Service will conduct a candidate status review for the Rio Grande cutthroat trout, which conservationists say has disappeared from nearly all of its historic range and is threatened by nonnative trout and habitat degradation, among other things.

In 2002, the agency determined that listing the fish wasn't warranted because the trout was neither endangered nor likely to become endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Since then, the agency has changed how it analyzes what constitutes a significant portion of a species' range.

The agency also said a significant amount of new information on the trout's status has been collected and that a new review is prudent.

The Center for Biological Diversity had first petitioned to have the trout protected in 1998 and has been fighting since to protect the fish.

"Without the protections of the Endangered Species Act, the Rio Grande cutthroat trout may be lost forever to extinction," said Noah Greenwald, a conservation biologist with the center. "We have a duty to protect the Rio Grande cutthroat trout and the rivers and streams it depends on."

Last month, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish and other groups announced a 10- to 15-year project to restore the pure-strain native trout to about 125 miles of streams and 20 lakes in the species' historic range in northern New Mexico.

Officials said the goal is to remove nonnative trout in phases that will include increased angling opportunities, electroshocking, salvage bag limits and short-lived chemicals if necessary. Eventually, the nonnative species will be replaced by the trout.

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