

Interim protections sought for little brown bats

December 20 2010, By Patrick Farrell

Scientists and conservation groups filed a formal request today asking the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to determine if little brown bats, once the most common bat species in the Northeast, need protection under the Endangered Species Act because of a fast-spreading, lethal disease called white-nose syndrome. The disease has already killed more than a million bats in the United States and scientists say it could wipe out little brown bats in the Northeast within the next two decades.

“The little brown bat is in imminent danger of extinction in its northeastern core range due to white-nose syndrome, and the species is likely in danger of extinction throughout North America,” said Dr. Thomas H. Kunz, a leading authority on bats at Boston University who coauthored a study earlier this year on the impacts of white-nose syndrome on the little brown bat.

Kunz and another bat scientist, Dr. Jonathan D. Reichard, conducted their own status review of the species that was submitted along with today’s request to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The review found that the little brown bat is at grave risk of disappearing from the region because of the impacts of white-nose syndrome, a disease first documented in upstate New York in 2006 that has already spread throughout the eastern United States as well as Quebec and Ontario. In some affected bat colonies in the Northeast, mortality rates from white-nose syndrome have been nearly 100 percent.

“The little brown bat desperately needs protection under the Endangered

Species Act,” said Mollie Matteson, conservation advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Losing this species would be a tragedy that would have disastrous consequences for people and other wildlife.”

The bat die-off has caused significant concern among biologists and conservation groups, not only because of potential extinction of one or more species but also because the night-flying mammals play a critical role in keeping insect populations in check. Based on earlier work by Kunz and others, scientists estimate that the loss of bats due to white-nose syndrome has, to date, meant upwards of 700 fewer tons of insects consumed per year, including many pests that attack farm crops and commercial timber. One consequence of fewer bats may be greater use of pesticides.

Based on the dire threat to the little brown bat from white-nose syndrome, the scientists and conservation groups today recommended that the Fish and Wildlife Service place the little brown bat on the federal endangered species list as an emergency measure until the agency can complete its own assessment and make a final ruling.

“If the little brown bat, one of America’s most common and widespread bats, is facing regional, and possibly total, extinction, imagine the threat to less-adaptable and far-reaching species,” said Nina Fascione, executive director of Bat Conservation International. “More than half of the 46 U.S. [bat species](#) are potentially susceptible to white-nose syndrome. We must protect the survivors before time runs out.”

Meanwhile, the Fish and Wildlife Service is, until Dec. 26, accepting public comments on its draft plan for addressing white-nose syndrome. And the Service is due to decide on a petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity to provide [Endangered Species Act](#) protections for the northern long-eared bat and the eastern small-footed bat, two other species seriously affected by white-nose syndrome.

Groups signing on in support of the status assessment request are Kunz and Reichard's Center for Ecology and Conservation Biology at Boston University, Friends of Blackwater Canyon, Wildlife Advocacy Project, Bat Conservation International and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Provided by Boston University

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