

Impact of proposed crayfish protections on mining industry uncertain

April 7 2015, by Sean Cockerham, McClatchy Washington Bureau

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to list species of Appalachian crayfish as endangered, with potential consequences for the struggling eastern Kentucky mining industry.

The Fish and Wildlife Service said Monday that the Big Sandy crayfish, which lives in streams in Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia, is in danger of extinction. The agency is also proposing to list the Guyandotte River crayfish, found at a single site in Wyoming County, W.Va.

The proposed endangered listing follows a 2013 settlement agreement between the agency and the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that sued to get protection for the crayfish, saying mountaintop removal coal mining was destroying its habitat.

"For decades coal companies have gotten away with polluting Appalachia's water and killing its species, but it is time for the endangered species act to start being enforced in Appalachia," Tierra Curry, a senior scientist for the Center for Biological Diversity, said Monday.

The Kentucky Coal Association, an industry trade group, referred questions to David Ledford, a biologist and president of the Appalachian Wildlife Foundation, which has worked with coal companies on environmental restoration of mining areas.

Ledford said he doesn't think the proposed listing will have a large

impact on Kentucky mining operations.

"It's my opinion that at this point it's not going to be that big a deal for the mining industry," he said. "It's generally way downstream from where the mines are."

Mike Floyd, a federal wildlife biologist in Kentucky, said mining is just one factor in the decline of the crayfish, which live beneath loose boulders in streams and rivers. The crayfish are threatened by human activities that add silt and sediments to the streams, he said.

"That can come from a number of different sources. Mining would be one, but it could be anything," Floyd said. "It could be road development, simple land development ... All those sorts of things that come along when people are around."

If the crayfish are listed as endangered, then federal agencies that issue permits for activities like mining and road construction would have to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service about how to keep them from harm, Floyd said.

The Big Sandy crayfish is found in four isolated populations across the upper Big Sandy River watershed in Kentucky, West Virginia and Virginia, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"There is quite a bit of [mining](#) going on in the Big Sandy drainage basin, which is where this would be, Pike and Floyd counties in Kentucky," Floyd said.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is taking comments for 60 days on the proposed listing before making a final decision on listing the [crayfish](#).

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Citation: Impact of proposed crayfish protections on mining industry uncertain (2015, April 7)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2015-04-impact-crayfish-industry-uncertain.html>

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