

Federal officials consider protections for cat-like predator

January 12 2016, by Matthew Brown

Government officials will consider new protections for a small, fanged predator that thrives in old-growth forests of the Northern Rockies over concerns that trapping, habitat loss and poisoning could be harming the animal's population.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Monday that it plans a yearlong review to determine if the Northern Rockies fisher should be protected under the Endangered Species Act.

The [species](#) historically occupied a Rocky Mountains range that stretched across parts of Washington, Utah, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming, wildlife advocates say. The animals are now limited in the Rockies to an area along the Montana-Idaho border.

The government in 2011 rejected protections for the cat-like animals. Biologists concluded at the time that while [fishers](#) are sensitive to trapping pressures, harvest levels did not appear to be harming the overall population.

Officials changed course after receiving new details on the accidental trapping of fishers in a 2013 petition from a coalition of advocacy groups led by The Center for Biological Diversity.

Monday's announcement does not mean that protections are likely, only that the groups provided enough information to warrant a more in-depth look, said Fish and Wildlife Service spokeswoman Serena Baker.

"We felt there was enough new evidence to suggest trapping, [habitat loss](#) and perhaps poisoning may still be concerns," she said.

Center for Biological Diversity attorney Andrea Santarsiere said statistics from the states point to a significant increase in the number of fishers being killed. Montana allows trappers to harvest a combined seven fishers annually—an activity banned elsewhere in the West.

"The fact that these fishers are completely isolated from any other population shows an increased threat," Santarsiere said.

A small West Coast population of the animals was deemed eligible for protection in 2004, although the government said other species had priority. They remain relatively abundant in parts of the Midwest and New England.

Sometimes likened to otters, fishers are agile furbearers that can reach about 15 pounds and nearly 4 feet long. They prey on small mammals and birds, and are the only known species to target porcupines.

In separate actions announced Monday, the Fish and Wildlife Service responded to petitions to change the legal status of two other Western species—bison in Yellowstone National Park and grizzly bears in the Cabinet-Yaak area along the Idaho Montana border.

Grizzlies retained their prior status as a threatened species. Protections for bison were rejected.

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Citation: Federal officials consider protections for cat-like predator (2016, January 12) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-federal-cat-like-predator.html>

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