

Bumblebees found coast to coast are studied for protection

March 15 2016, by Dan Elliott

Two species of wild bumblebees found from Alaska to North Carolina and in Canada will be considered for protection under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. government said Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to study the Western bumblebee and yellow-banded bumblebee to see if they warrant listing as threatened or endangered. The review could take a year or more.

The yellow-banded bee's historic range includes 23 states from the Great Plains to New England, part of the Atlantic Coast and eight Canadian provinces. The Western bee's range includes 14 Western and Great Plains states, as well as three provinces and one territory in Canada.

The two species overlap in both countries.

The environmental group Defenders of Wildlife, which asked the service to consider protecting the bees, said they are important pollinators of both native plants and commercial crops.

"They provide (pollination) services all over the nation for free that otherwise people have to hire beekeepers to provide," said Jay Tutchton, a Defenders of Wildlife staff attorney in Denver. "These are species that are very valuable to humanity."

Tutchton said the bees are threatened by a category of pesticides called neonicotinoids and a parasite called nosema bombi. The bees are in

decline on the coasts and in river valleys where commercial farming is widespread, he said.

Neither Tutchton nor federal officials could say how big the two populations are.

"We know the numbers are down," said Mark Sattelberg, a field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service in Cheyenne, Wyoming, who will be part of the study of the Western bumblebee.

Western and yellow-banded bumblebees live in the wild and are different from bees raised commercially to produce honey and pollinate crops, Tutchton said.

Protections could include restrictions on neonicotinoid pesticides in critical bee habitat and steps to ensure commercial bees are disease-free before they are imported or moved across state lines, he said.

Diana Cox-Foster, a bee researcher with the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Logan, Utah, said the effects of neonicotinoids and the parasite have been documented in commercial bees but less is known about their impact on wild bees.

A spokeswoman for a pesticide industry group didn't immediately return an after-hours email.

USDA has reported widespread failures of bee colonies because of parasites, disease, pesticides and nutrition problems.

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