

# Rusty patched bumblebee now an endangered species

January 10 2017, by John Flesher

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This 2012 photo provided by The Xerces Society shows a rusty patched bumblebee in Minnesota. Federal officials said Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2017, that the rusty patched bumblebee has become the first bee species in the continental U.S. to be declared endangered after suffering a dramatic population decline over the past 20 years. (Sarina Jepsen/The Xerces Society via AP)

The rusty patched bumblebee has become the first bee species in the continental U.S. to be declared endangered after suffering a dramatic

population decline over the past 20 years, federal officials said Tuesday.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service first told The Associated Press it was adding the bee to the endangered list before a news release was issued. That means there will be a recovery plan to encourage people to provide more habitat and reduce pesticide usage—many steps that could help other struggling bees and monarch butterflies, which pollinate a wide variety of plants, officials said.

"Pollinators are small but mighty parts of the natural mechanism that sustains us and our world," said Tom Melius, the service's Midwest regional director. "Without them, our forests, parks, meadows and shrublands, and the abundant, vibrant life they support, cannot survive, and our crops require laborious, costly pollination by hand."

The decision drew praise from environmentalists but criticism from the nonprofit American Farm Bureau Federation, which acknowledged the role bees play in pollinating crops but contended the listing could lead to costly regulation of land or chemical use.

"I think we can do better in the private sector, where landowners working collaboratively can come up with protection for these species without intervention and bureaucratic red tape of the federal government," said Ryan Yates, the group's director of congressional relations.

The Endangered Species Act prohibits significant modification or degradation of habitat that leads directly to death or injury of listed species. The Fish and Wildlife Service said it hadn't yet developed a strategy for dealing with private landowners regarding the rusty patched bumblebee, which it said already has disappeared from large-scale farming areas and is found mostly in yards and gardens.

Officials said they would seek cooperation from landowners and local organizations on "bee-friendly practices," including use of native flowering plants for landscaping, planting flowers and trees and avoiding use of pesticides that harm bees.



This 2016 photo provided by The Xerces Society shows a rusty patched bumblebee in Minnesota. Federal officials said Tuesday, Jan. 10, 2017, that the rusty patched bumblebee has become the first bee species in the continental U.S. to be declared endangered after suffering a dramatic population decline over the past 20 years. (Sarah Foltz Jordan/The Xerces Society via AP)

Notable for the rust-colored marking on its back section, the rusty patched bumblebee buzzed across the East Coast and much of the Midwest in high numbers as recently as the 1990s. Today, only scattered populations remain in 13 states—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio,

Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and Wisconsin—and the Canadian province of Ontario. The bee's historic range and the number of observed colonies have plummeted by about 87 percent since the late 1990s.

The crash happened so quickly that few researchers took notice until the damage was largely done. They're investigating a number of potential causes, including disease, pesticide exposure, habitat loss, climate change and the domino effect of falling populations making it harder for bees to find suitable mates.

The Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation, which petitioned the government to list the bee as endangered, previously said the population decline probably was caused by the spread of bacteria or viruses from bumblebees raised commercially to those in the wild. The group, based in Portland, Oregon, also blamed widespread use of long-lasting insecticides.

"Addressing the threats that the rusty patched bumble bee faces will help not only this species, but countless other native pollinators that are so critical to the functioning of natural ecosystems and agriculture," Rich Hatfield, the society's senior conservation biologist, said Tuesday.

Fish and Wildlife Service biologists agreed there probably were overlapping factors behind recent declines of bumblebees, honeybees and monarchs—raising concern for all 48 bumblebee species in North America. The agency in September placed seven species of yellow-faced bees in Hawaii, that state's only native bees, on the endangered list. A study continues on whether to list the monarch butterfly, agency spokeswoman Georgia Parham said.

Bees and other insects provide billions of dollars' worth of pollination each year, benefiting crops such as tomatoes, cranberries and peppers.

Even plants that can pollinate on their own generate bigger fruit when bumblebees do the job instead.

The bees also support growth of flowers and wild plants that produce fruits, seeds and nuts essential for natural food chains.

Listing the bee is "the best—and probably last—hope" for its survival, said Rebecca Riley, senior attorney with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

**More information:** [www.fws.gov/Midwest/endangered](http://www.fws.gov/Midwest/endangered)

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