

US wildlife officials propose downlisting endangered beetle

May 1 2019, by Tim Talley

Federal wildlife officials said Wednesday a large scavenging beetle that has been classified as endangered since 1989 has become more plentiful and should be downlisted to threatened, a decision that environmentalists said is not justified by scientific data.

The American burying beetle was once found in 35 states and three Canadian provinces. It was on the brink of extinction when it was classified as endangered three decades ago, when it was found only in small populations in eastern Oklahoma and Block Island off the coast of Rhode Island.

Conservation efforts over the past 30 years have helped the beetle recover and it is now also found in Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, Texas, and on Nantucket Island off the coast of Massachusetts, said Amy Leuders, southwest regional director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services.

"We have made some positive steps forward and are now proposing to downlist the beetle," Leuders said.

Although the beetle continues to face threats from increasing temperatures due to climate change and land use changes in parts of the range, the species no longer meets the definition of endangered, the agency said.

Noah Greenwald, endangered species director for the Arizona-based

Center for Biological Diversity, said the agency's decision is driven by political pressure from the oil and gas industry, which bears significant costs to protect the beetle and other endangered species.

"The science shows the American burying beetle is even more endangered now, yet the Trump administration is severely reducing its habitat protections," Greenwald said.

Daniel R. Howard, assistant professor of Ecology, Evolution and Behavior at the University of New Hampshire, said pressure from lobbyists representing the oil and gas industry, along with small producers, led to the active participation of Oklahoma politicians in the petition to downlist the beetle.

"Oil and gas have not had a free pass on compliance with federal law related to endangered species in Oklahoma," Howard said.

Meanwhile, Chad Warmington, president of the OIPA-OKOGA, an oil and gas industry trade group, said downlisting the endangered beetle "provides significant regulatory relief" to oil and gas producers "and is a step in the right direction for appropriate conservation of our native species."

"The oil and gas industry's implementation of significant conservation and recovery programs is a key reason the beetle has and will continue to flourish," Warmington said.

The large, black, nocturnal beetle has hardened protective wing covers marked by two scalloped shaped orange patterns. The beetles are scavengers that eat decaying animals. They lay their eggs beside a small carcass that they bury, then feed their larvae from that carcass.

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