

US mulls endangered status for Nevada plant in mine fight

July 24 2020, by Scott Sonner



In this Feb. 10, 2020, file photo, a series of greenhouses are pictured at the University of Nevada, Reno, where a rare desert wildflower is growing. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says there's enough scientific evidence that two rare plants in Nevada's desert could go extinct to warrant a year-long review of whether to list them as U.S. endangered species, including one at the center of a fight over a proposed lithium mine. (AP Photo/Scott Sonner, File)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says there's enough scientific evidence that two rare plants in Nevada's desert could go extinct to warrant a year-long review of whether to list them as endangered species, including one at the center of a fight over a proposed lithium mine.

Tiehm's [buckwheat](#), which is found on just 10 acres (4 hectares) of federal land in west-central Nevada and believed to exist nowhere else in the world, could be wiped out by the lithium mine proposed 200 miles (320 kilometers) southeast of Reno, according to conservationists who petitioned for both listings last year.

The Las Vegas bearpoppy is facing threats from dramatic habitat loss in southern Nevada due to urban sprawl and mining, as well as killer bees, they said.

The service said in a formal 90-day finding published in the Federal Register on Wednesday the petitioners presented "substantial scientific or commercial information" that listings of both plants may be warranted and, consequently, the agency will initiate full-status reviews of the species.

It agreed the buckwheat is potentially threatened by destruction of habitat from mining, as well as [invasive species](#), off-road vehicles, wildfires, livestock grazing and [climate change](#).

The bearpoppy is threatened by urbanization, mining, recreation, climate change and the invasive bees, the agency said.

Existing regulatory mechanisms may be inadequate to address impacts of the threats, the agency concluded in the ruling cheered by

environmentalists.

"Nevada has some of the world's most remarkable botanical diversity and we're thrilled these beautiful flowers are moving toward Endangered Species Act protection," said Patrick Donnelly of the Center for Biological Diversity



In this Feb. 10, 2020, file photo, a plant ecologist at the University of Nevada, Reno, points to a tiny Tiehm's buckwheat that has sprouted at a campus greenhouse in Reno, Nevada. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says there's enough scientific evidence that two rare plants in Nevada's desert could go extinct to warrant a year-long review of whether to list them as U.S. endangered species, including one at the center of a fight over a proposed lithium mine. (AP

Photo/Scott Sonner, File)

"Wildflower aren't just pretty to look at. They're building blocks of the desert ecosystem and we can't let them go extinct," said Donnelly, Nevada state director of the group that filed the petitions and sued the Bureau of Land Management last year to block the mine.

Ioneer Ltd, the Australian-based company that wants to build the mine, has spent millions exploring the site it says is one of the world's biggest undeveloped lithium-boron deposits critical to making batteries for electric cars.

It also recently agreed to a five-year extension of a research project it's financing at the University of Nevada, Reno, where scientists started growing hundreds of Tiehm's buckwheat seedlings this year in a campus greenhouse to determine whether it's feasible to transplant them in the wild to bolster its limited population.

"Ioneer looks forward to the USFWS full status review of Tiehm's buckwheat and stands ready to assist the Service in any way possible," the company said in a statement emailed to The Associated Press.

The company acknowledges Tiehm's buckwheat hasn't been documented anywhere else on earth, but denies the mine would lead to its extinction.

Nearly 100 environmental scientists and university professors, mostly from Nevada and California, disagreed in a letter earlier this week to state officials considering whether to add the buckwheat to a list of protected species in Nevada.

"Tiehm's buckwheat has lived in its ecosystem, relatively undisturbed,

for millennia," said the July 20 letter to the Nevada Division of Forestry, signed by 91 ecologists, biologists, botanists and geneticists from nearly a dozen states stretching from Hawaii to North Carolina.

"If the project were approved, there is no doubt that it would cause the extinction of an irreplaceable component of Nevada's native heritage," they wrote.

Conservationists said in the listing petition in October that the surviving population of *Theim's* was estimated between 20,000 and 43,000 individual plants.

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