

Texas Comptroller asks feds to consider energy industry in endangered bat listing

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Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar has asked U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to refrain from identifying critical habitats for tricolored bats over concerns about how it could limit the state's ability to produce

energy.

Tricolored bats are one of the smallest bat [species](#) in North America and are in danger of extinction because of a disease known as [white-nose syndrome](#), which is spread by a [fungal pathogen](#) that infects the skin of bats, according to [federal officials](#).

In a letter to the agency on Nov. 14, Hegar wrote that designating the [bat species](#) to a critical [habitat](#) could interfere with the state's ability to generate oil, gas, wind and other sources of energy.

"Given the distribution of tricolored bats compared to the actual prevalence of white-nose syndrome in Texas, designating significant portions of the state could have major economic implications if a [critical habitat](#) designation reduces or impedes energy production," he wrote.

The federal agency proposed listing the bats as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in September, and identifying critical habitats is a tool protected by the legislation, meant to support the continued conservation of the species.

"There's a whole lot of threats that are facing the species, including white-nose syndrome," agency biologist Jennifer Smith-Castro said. "That's essentially the reason why we're listing, because we are concerned about the status based on those threats."

These habitats usually have certain "biological and [physical features](#)" that are essential to the survival of an endangered species, Smith-Castro said.

However, in its proposed rule, the agency determined that designating critical habitats for the tricolored bat is "not prudent" because current dwellings for the species are not facing widespread destruction or

modification.

Tricolored bats usually live in caves and mines, but in Texas and other Southern states, they can be seen in roadside culverts.

Designating habitats for the species could also make the bats more susceptible to human disturbance, such as vandalism or research-related activities.

"Calling out the hibernacula and the roost locations is a problem in some cases," Smith-Castro said. "And so that may be what led us to the not-prudent finding."

The agency said in a statement that identifying critical habitats could not only harm tricolored bat populations, but also increase the spread of white-nose syndrome.

The disease is a skin irritant that can appear as white fuzz on their muzzle and wings, Smith-Castro said. It affects tricolored bats during hibernation in the winter, when they go into a state of low energy, or torpor, and cannot combat it as readily.

Listing a species as endangered, including the decision on whether to designate critical habitats, is a process that can take up to 12 months. The service is in the middle of evaluating public comments before it makes a final decision.

In his statement, Hegar said that Texas is an industry leader in oil and gas, adding the decision could have "serious implications" for the state and national economy.

In response, the federal agency said in a statement that it has a reputation for working with stakeholders to conserve bats while allowing economic

activities to continue.

"We work with forest managers, wind facility operators, and project proponents to find strategies to avoid harming or killing of listed bats using our various conservation tools, authorities, and programs," the agency wrote.

Tricolored bats are prevalent in the eastern and central parts of Texas, with some populations expanding west and north. They haven't been affected by white-nose syndrome nearly as much as populations in other parts of the country, Smith-Castro said.

"We haven't seen a sort of huge die-off like we've seen in some of the other states, so we're just kind of doing monitoring regularly and trying to keep tabs on what's happening," she said.

Smith-Castro said bats play an essential role in the ecosystem by serving as natural pest control and pollinators. By eating insects and some mosquitos, bats save farmers up to \$3 billion per year in pesticides they would otherwise have to purchase, according to federal officials.

"It's significant—those [ecosystem services](#) are invaluable," Smith-Castro said. "We are lucky, we have them out there doing these things for us."

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