

Lawsuit expected to protect Montana arctic grayling

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Interested parties disagree with decision to remove fish from protection of endangered species act

PORTLAND, Ore. - The Center for Biological Diversity, Western Watersheds Project, Dr. Pat Munday and former Montana fishing guide George Wuerthner officially notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service May 15th that they will sue over an April 24, 2007 decision that the Montana fluvial arctic grayling no longer warrants protection as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act. Rather than concluding Montana grayling are recovered and secure, the agency instead decided that extinction of the Montana population, which is the last in the lower 48 states, is insignificant. Montana fluvial arctic grayling "As is the case with increasing numbers of species, the Bush government is perfectly willing to let the Montana fluvial arctic grayling go extinct in the continental United States," said Noah Greenwald, conservation biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "If it had been up to Bush, the bald eagle would never have been protected: there were plenty of them in Canada and Alaska." According to anonymous sources in the agency, the decision went against the recommendations of the agency's own biologists in Montana. It was made in Washington, D.C., under the influence of Assistant Secretary of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Julie MacDonald, who resigned under pressure April 30th after an investigation by the Department of Interior's Inspector General found she had bullied agency scientists to change their conclusions and improperly released internal documents to industry lobbyists and attorneys. On May 9th, the House Natural Resources Committee held a hearing on the administration's interference in scientific decisions at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which focused in part on MacDonald's malfeasance. "The Bush administration has closed the door on protection for the nation's endangered species," noted Greenwald. "It has listed fewer species under the Endangered Species Act than any other administration since the law was enacted in 1973, to date only listing 57 species compared to 512 under Clinton and 234 under the first Bush president." Once found throughout the upper Missouri River drainage above Great Falls, the fluvial arctic grayling has been reduced to a single self-sustaining population in a short stretch of the Big Hole River above Divide Dam. A primary factor in this range decline was, and continues to be, the dewatering of the grayling's stream habitat and degradation of riparian areas. Extensive water withdrawals from the Big Hole River and seven consecutive years of drought continue to threaten the Big Hole population. In recent years, so few grayling have been found that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks have not been able to estimate their populations. "Failure to leave enough water in the Big Hole River to sustain the grayling and other wildlife dependent on the river is a classic example of the tragedy of the commons," said noted conservationist and former Montana fishing guide George Wuerthner. "This is about more than saving the grayling, this is about saving a national treasure - the Big Hole River." The groups are represented by Judi Brawer from Advocates for the West in Boise, Idaho and Amy Atwood of the Western Environmental Law Center. Background A member of the salmon family, the arctic grayling is a beautiful fish with a prominent dorsal fin that is widely distributed across Canada and Alaska. Historically, fluvial populations of arctic grayling existed in only two places in the lower 48 states: Michigan and the upper Missouri River of Montana. Populations in Michigan went extinct by the 1930s, and populations in Montana were restricted to the Big Hole River by the end of the 1970s.

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