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Endangered species listing for Kootenai River burbot sought by conservationists

BOISE - Two conservation groups filed a complaint today in federal court seeking a final decision by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to protect the Kootenai River burbot of northern Idaho and northwest Montana under the Endangered Species Act. Under the law, a decision was required 12 months after they received the group's first petition on Feb. 7, 2000

"The petition spells out the danger of extinction to the few remaining burbot, and the lack of any effort to save the fish," said Jerry Pavia, president of the board for the Idaho Conservation League and a Bonners Ferry resident.

The burbot was once an abundant as well as a popular sport fishery in the Kootenai River flowing through the northern edge of Idaho and northwest corner of Montana, before the river was dammed at Libby, Montana. Today the fresh water cod is almost extinct because river flows have been altered at critical spawning times. The dam has also negatively impacted nutrient flows necessary to support the web of life in the river on which the native fish depends.

"After almost three decades of inattention, it's time to give this once prolific native fish the protection it deserves. The ESA will put in place the necessary steps to protect and recover the 'leopard of the Kootenai'", said Rob Ament, executive director of the American Wildlands. "One simple step is for the operators of the Libby Dam to provide slower flows that mimic more natural levels for the fish to have successful spawning during the winter."

Flows of the Kootenai River were altered in December, but the Army Corp refused to change flows now in the second critical month of January. The low water year of 2000-01 allowed the burbot to spawn for the first time in at least 15 years, according to Idaho Fish and Game. Conservationists are seeking to institutionalize low flows during spawning months.

Representatives of the Idaho Conservation League have worked for years with the Idaho Fish and Game Department, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Army Corps of Engineers, and the Bonneville Power Administration, to implement actions on behalf of burbot recovery.

"We tried to work with the agencies, but got nowhere with the operators of the dam -- the Corps of Engineers and the BPA -- who have so much as told us they aren't going to change anything unless there is an ESA listing," said Pavia. "The petition we submitted proves ESA listing is needed and now maybe something will get done."

Until the early 1970s, sport anglers reported catching 40 or more burbot a night in the Kootenai River. Today only 200 to 300 fish are left.

"To allow a significant component of this river ecosystem and our natural heritage to disappear is inexcusable," said Pavia. "It's time to save these fish."

The groups are represented by the Land and Water Fund of the Rockies in Boise.

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