

# Leopard frog may require protections, federal agency says

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GREEN RIVER - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials concluded in a report issued this week that western populations of the northern leopard frog may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The species can be found in most areas of Wyoming except the northwest portion of the state, according to biologists.

The Fish and Wildlife Service recently completed its initial review three years after receiving the petition from eight conservation groups seeking to protect the northern leopard frog throughout its historic range west of the Mississippi River and Great Lakes.

The agency's next step will be to undertake a more thorough, scientific review of the species' range, populations and habitat, spokesman Jeff Humphrey said.

The status assessment will serve as the basis for the agency's determination as to whether the frog population warrants protections under the act.

The Center for Native Ecosystems and seven other environmental groups, including the Laramie-based Biodiversity Conservation Alliance, submitted the petition to the Service in June 2006.

Federal biologists believe that while leopard frogs were once common, their populations are undergoing a dramatic decline from vast areas of its historical range in the western United States and Canada.

While no single factor has been flagged as the major cause for the reduced population, biologists point to contributing factors such as declines in water quality, climate change, pollution, disease, introduced non-native species, chemicals and wetland and habitat loss.

Conservationists say diminishing frog numbers is an early indication that pollution and disease are degrading the region's ponds and wetlands.

"Western leopard frogs are the canary in the coal mine for our water quality across a large part of the country," said Erin Robertson, a senior staff biologist for the Center for Native Ecosystems.

"When these frogs are at risk of extinction, we should be alarmed about the state of our wetlands and waterways," Robertson said in a media release.

## Spotted frogs

The western northern leopard frog is endemic in 19 states, including Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Colorado and Utah.

The amphibian is a smooth-skinned green, brown or sometimes yellow-green with large, oval dark spots, each of which is surrounded by a lighter halo.

The northern leopard frog requires a mosaic of habitats to meet all of its life stages. The frog breeds in a variety of aquatic habitat that includes slow-moving or still water along streams and rivers, wetlands and beaver ponds.

The frog ranges from 2 to 4.5 inches long, and the species buries in the mud to winter in ponds. The frog can live in mountain elevations up to 11,000 feet.

The species is common throughout Wyoming except in Teton County, Park County and Yellowstone National Park, according to Wyoming Game and Fish Department data.

Robertson said scientists have been reporting declines in northern leopard frog populations since the early 1960s, and that the species is now on the brink of extinction in some states.

In Minnesota and some other Midwestern states, widespread reports of leopard frogs with deformed limbs and bodies, including extra limbs, are believed to be tied to declining water quality, he noted.

Conservationists contend that decades of pesticide contamination - particularly from the chemical Atrazine - has been linked to the spread of a deadly fungus among the frogs.

Noah Greenwald, Biodiversity Program Director for the Center for Biological Diversity, said the frog has also proven "invaluable" for medical research, particularly with enzymes found in the frog's body that are currently in clinical trials for use as a cancer treatment.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials said the agency delayed its response to the petition while the agency was involved with court orders and settlement agreements for other listing actions.

Those actions involved species the agency considered in need of more immediate protections.

Officials said the northern leopard frog petition provided substantial information that suggested the western U.S. population of the species is genetically distinct from the eastern northern leopard frog.

Under ESA rules, animal populations that are discrete, significant and threatened can be considered for protection.