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Lawsuit Launched Seeking Emergency Protection for Rare Texas Salamander Threatened by Austin Water Project

AUSTIN, Texas— The Center for Biological Diversity and Save Our Springs Alliance formally notified the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today of their intent to sue the agency for failing to provide emergency Endangered Species Act protection to a rare Texas animal, the Jollyville Plateau salamander. The city of Austin's ongoing construction of a water-treatment plant in the heart of salamander habitat poses an urgent threat to the salamander's survival.

"This tiny salamander, which exists nowhere in the world except Texas, could be driven extinct by the construction," said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney with the Center who is focused on protecting rare amphibians and reptiles. "So this is an emergency. The salamander needs immediate protection under the Endangered Species Act, our most effective law for protecting endangered wildlife from extinction."

The initial phase of shaft and tunnel construction for the city of Austin's controversial new water-treatment plant is underway. City officials discovered last month that more than 2,000 gallons of water per day were leaking into a 40-foot-wide construction shaft being excavated through porous limestone of the northern Edwards Aquifer. The Jollyville Plateau salamander lives in springs that depend on a constant supply of water from this aquifer; the leaking shaft threatens to dewater critical salamander habitat and heightens fears that without federal protection for the salamander, Austin's water project will plow ahead without conservation measures to prevent the extinction of the species.

"The city's miles-long tunnel dig has barely begun and it's already draining the small aquifer that supports the salamander," said Bill Bunch, executive director of the Save Our Springs Alliance. "Endangered Species Act protection for the Jollyville Plateau salamander could finally force the city of Austin to take steps to ensure that the salamander is protected."

Another threat to the salamander is the ongoing Texas drought — the worst one-year drought on record, likely driven in part by climate change. The portion of the Edwards Aquifer underlying the Jollyville Plateau cannot sustain spring flows during periods of drought, and drying spring habitats strand and kill salamanders. Together, the drought and the leaking shaft pose a severe threat of disrupting flow to the salamander's essential habitats. Efforts by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the city to negotiate a plan to conserve the species — a "Candidate Conservation Agreement with Assurances" — have collapsed, leaving the salamander without protection from tunnel construction and other threats.

Background

Unlike most salamanders, the Jollyville Plateau salamander retains external gills throughout its life and inhabits springs, spring runs and wet caves. The salamander is limited to a small number of drainages both on and off the Jollyville Plateau in Travis and Williamson counties, Texas.

In response to a 2005 petition from Save Our Springs Alliance, the Service determined in 2007 that the salamander warranted listing as a threatened or endangered species but that such listing was precluded by higher priority actions. The Service added the salamander to its list of "candidates" for protection, many of which have waited decades without receiving any such protection. The delay in listing has allowed the city of Austin to move forward with tunneling for its new water-treatment plant in key salamander habitat.

In 2011, the Center reached a landmark agreement with the Service compelling the agency to move forward with the protection process for 757 species, including the Jollyville Plateau salamander and many other candidates. That agreement requires the Service to issue an Endangered Species Act listing proposal for the salamander by the end of 2012. The lawsuit launched today seeks immediate Endangered Species Act protection.

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