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Mollusk may join protection list

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is looking at the Columbia springsnail and two related species

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Another species may join the dozen salmon listed as endangered or threatened by Columbia Basin dams and development: a tiny, whorled-shell mollusk discovered in 1995 at scattered sites in the Columbia River.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday said the Columbia springsnail and two related mollusks merit consideration for federal protection based on new scientific information. At the same time, the service said it will reconsider the current "endangered" status for the Idaho springsnail.

Idaho Power Co. is among those seeking to de-list the Idaho springsnail, whose protected status impinges on the operations of the company's Hells Canyon dam complex. The state of Idaho joined the petition, which cites a recent study concluding that the snail belongs to the same species as snails found in Oregon and Wyoming.

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The Western Watersheds Project, an Idaho conservation group, and others are making the case that all of the snails merit federal protection, even if they represent a single species.

The Columbia River springsnails' known range is limited to six sites upriver from Bonneville Dam. The Harney Lake springsnail persists in four springs in Harney County, and Oregon's Natural Heritage Program has designated it "critically imperiled." The Wyoming population is found at a single spring.

Advocates such as ecologist Peter Bowler of the University of California at Irvine say the snails are threatened by dams, which have flooded and buried habitat in sediment; pollution from farm runoff; and competition from invasive species such as the New Zealand mudsnail.

The Fish and Wildlife Service has a year to determine whether the Idaho springsnail should be delisted and whether the other three springsnail species should be listed. The agency will accept public comments until June 20, by mail to Snake River Fish and Wildlife Office, 1387 S. Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, Idaho 83709, by fax to 208-378-5262, or by e-mail to fw1srbocomment@fws.gov.