

[4310-55]

[50 CFR Part 17]

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED WILDLIFE AND PLANTS

Proposed Endangered Status for the Socorro Isopod (*Exosphaeroma thermophilum*)

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Proposed rule.

SUMMARY: The Service proposes that the Socorro isopod (*Exosphaeroma thermophilum*), known only from near Socorro, N. Mex., be listed as an endangered species. A review of the status of this isopod reveals (1) that less than 2,500 individuals exist; (2) that its entire natural habitat has been so modified that, in its current condition, it is not useable by the species; and (3) that the species continues to survive precariously in an artificial habitat that it has adopted. This rule would provide needed protection for the Socorro isopod in its present artificial habitat and could possibly lead to a reestablishment of the species elsewhere in the wild.

DATES: Comments from the public must be received by February 28, 1978. Comments from the Governors of States involved with this action must be received by March 30, 1978.

ADDRESSES: Submit comments to Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. Comments and materials received will be available for public inspection during normal business hours at the Service's Office of Endangered Species, Suite 1100, 1612 K Street NW., Washington, D.C. 20240.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

Mr. Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director, Federal Assistance, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240, 202-343-4646.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

BACKGROUND

The Socorro isopod occupies the outflow of a thermal aquatic habitat called Sedillo Spring which is located near the base of the Socorro Mountains southwest of Socorro, N. Mex. The species is of particular interest and importance in that it is one of only two fully freshwater isopods in the family of *Sphaeromidae*. The problem of how this species arrived at its present state of evolutionary adaptation is of concern to isopod specialists, and the concept of landlocked fauna is of concern to biologists as a whole. The Service proposes to list

the Socorro isopod as an endangered species pursuant to section 4 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, 16 U.S.C. § 1533.

SUMMARY OF THE FACTORS AFFECTING THE SPECIES

The Socorro isopod is endangered today because of destruction and modification of its habitat. The Socorro thermal area extends at least two miles along the front of the Socorro Mountains and at least half a mile westward of it. Within this thermal area, water issues from three springs (Socorro, Sedillo, and Cook). Sedillo Spring appears to have followed a separate drainageway for a short distance before being dissipated into underlying permeable fan gravels. During late Pleistocene and early Holocene time, waters from Socorro and Cook Springs fed into a cienega that extended about one-half mile eastward from Cook Spring. In recent years these springs have been greatly altered by municipal and private water development projects. All of the flow is presently intercepted at the surface and is capped off, the water being piped primarily to the city of Socorro. This capping off of the springs has resulted in the loss of the entire original inhabitat of the Socorro isopod.

Today, the Socorro isopod survives only within the confines of the partially open conduit system of an abandoned bathhouse referred to as "Evergreen." This artificial habitat is supplied with water from Sedillo Spring and, because that spring is only a few hundred feet away, the water emerges with much of the original water quality and thermal characteristics retained. Because of the direct link between Sedillo Spring and the "Evergreen" bathhouse, the present population of isopods is thought to have originated from Sedillo Spring. Apparently, when the spring was capped and their natural habitat destroyed, some of the isopods made their way into the conduits and were able to survive in that environment. It is not known whether these isopods ever occurred in Cook or Socorro Springs. The conduits in which the species now occurs consist of less than 90 feet of iron pipe, and are entirely on privately owned land.

At present, the population of the Socorro isopod in the conduits is estimated to number only 2449 animals. Current threats to these animals, in addition to their dependence on a highly restricted and fragile ecosystem, include reduced water flow in time of drought (such a condition existed this summer), and periodic cleaning and dredging of the conduit system.

The new Mexico Department of Game and Fish has urged the rapid listing of this species, and has provided the data upon which the above summary is based. These data were gathered by Michael Hatch of the New Mexico Department of

Game and Fish, and are available in the Office of Endangered Species for examination. Stephen Schuster has also provided extensive support data which is available for examination as well.

EFFECT OF THE RULEMAKING

If this rulemaking is finalized, it will give the Socorro isopod all of the protection from "take" provided by section 9 of the act. In addition, listing of this species will allow for such benefits of the act as cooperative research, Federal aid and land acquisition which could assist in the establishment of the species in a natural ecosystem elsewhere.

Under section 7 of the act, all Federal agencies would be required to assure that their actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of this species. They would also, where possible, be required to utilize their authorities in furtherance of the purposes of the act by carrying out programs for the conservation of the Socorro isopod.

PUBLIC COMMENTS SOLICITED

The Director intends that the rules finally adopted be as effective as possible in the conservation of the Socorro isopod. Therefore, the Director desires to obtain the comments and suggestions of the public, other concerned governmental agencies, the scientific community, or any other interested party, on these proposed rules. Final promulgation of regulations will take into consideration the comments received by the Director. Such comments, and any additional information received, may lead the Director to adopt final regulations that differ from this proposal.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

An environmental assessment has been prepared in conjunction with this proposal. It is on file in the Service's Office of Endangered Species, and may be examined during regular business hours or can be obtained by mail. A determination will be made at the time of final rulemaking as to whether this is a major Federal action which would significantly affect the quality of section 102(2) (C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. This proposed rulemaking is issued under the authority contained in the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

The primary author of this document is John L. Paradise, Office of Endangered Species 202-343-7814.

REGULATION PROMULGATION

Accordingly, it is hereby proposed to amend Part 17, Subpart B, Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations as set forth below:

It is proposed to amend § 17.11 by adding the following species to the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants:

§ 17.11 Endangered and threatened wildlife.

Species		Range					
Common name	Scientific name	Population	Known distribution	Portion of range where threatened or endangered	Status	When listed	Special rules
Crustacea, Isopod, Socorro.	<i>Exosphaeroma thermophilus</i> .	NA	USA (New Mexico)	Entire	E		NA

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PROPOSED RULES

NOTE.—The Service has determined that this document does not contain a major proposal requiring preparation of an Economic Impact Statement under Executive Order 11949 and OMB Circular A-107.

Dated: December 16, 1977.

LYNN A. GREENWALT,
Director,
Fish and Wildlife Service.

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