

Officials blast plan to protect tiny fish

By Liz Teitz
STAFF WRITER

A plan to put two species of fish that live in the Edwards Aquifer on the endangered list could have “enormous” consequences for San Antonio’s water supply and for the aquifer as a whole, city utility officials say — and they are joined by the Edwards Aquifer Authority and Texas’ two U.S. senators in opposing the proposal.

In August, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed adding two species of cave-dwelling catfish to the federal endangered species list. The toothless blindcat and widemouth blindcat live deep in the Edwards Aquifer, about 1,000 feet below San Antonio, in an area inaccessible to humans.

The federal agency says the fish are in danger of becoming extinct because they are being killed in the process of pumping groundwater out of the Edwards Aquifer.

Federal officials haven’t said what rules could be put in place to protect the fish species. But protections typically include restrictions on what can be done to a species’ habitat — which in this case is the Edwards Aquifer, an underground limestone cavern system that spans 3,600 miles and

Fish continues on A8 provides water for more than 2 million people.

Officials with San Antonio Water System, the city-owned water utility, say the proposal is based on inadequate research and that moving forward with the plan

could cost San Antonio taxpayers billions of dollars and could create water supply problems for key pieces of infrastructure, as well as major businesses and tourist attractions. SAWS, which serves more than 500,000 customers, gets about half its water supply from the Edwards Aquifer.

“The potential impacts of the proposal are enormous and may severely impact the provision of water to SAWS customers, requiring an entire revamping of several areas of SAWS service area costing billions of dollars,” SAWS said in a comment letter to the Fish and Wildlife Service. “The proposal may also significantly impact the reliability of necessary water supply to major electrical plants that provide electricity to SAWS customers, downtown hotels, businesses, major tourist attractions in the area, hospitals and schools.”

The Edwards Aquifer Authority, which manages the aquifer, also formally opposed the endangered designations, saying the proposal was premature.

“The best available science regarding the distribution, status and potential protection of both the toothless blindcat and the widemouth blindcat is extremely limited and, in our opinion needs further study prior to determining whether listing them is appropriate,” the aquifer authority said in a Tuesday statement.

Sens. Ted Cruz and John Cornyn, both of Texas, also registered their objections in a letter to U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland and Fish and Wildlife Service Director Martha Williams.

“This proposed rule falls far short at justifying protections for the toothless blindcat and widemouth blindcat under the Endangered Species Act,” they wrote.

The senators and SAWS asked the agency to immediately withdraw the proposed rule.

In its 50-page comment letter, SAWS said the proposed rule was based on “a significant lack of understanding of the technical as-

pects of SAWS groundwater wells, and specifically those under artesian pressure, leading the Service to erroneously conclude that groundwater wells pose a threat to blindcats.”

Edward Guzman, SAWS’ vice president for environmental law and regulatory compliance, wrote in the letter that the utility’s groundwater wells are pumping water at approximately 500 feet above where the blindcats are believed to live, and said the boreholes through the confined aquifer are “an infinitesimally small area compared to the overall potential habitat of the blindcats.”

Halting production from certain wells due to the “unsupported conclusion” that pumping is affecting the species’ habitat and mortality rate would reduce SAWS’ capacity by “millions of gallons a day,” amounting to the water used by half a million people each day, Guzman said. The locations of those wells would affect water used by H-E-B’s food processing plant, CPS Energy’s Braunig and Calaveras Power Stations and the central business district, which includes several hospitals.

It would also affect SAWS’ aquifer storage and recovery program, which is part of the Edwards Aquifer Habitat Conservation Plan to protect endangered species. Donovan Burton, SAWS’ senior vice president of water resources and governmental relations, said that plan was the result of decades of disputes and efforts across the region before it was completed in 2013. The listing “could blow up decades of work,” he said.

“Ultimately, the only way that (plan) works is through our aquifer storage and recovery. That’s the cornerstone of that whole plan,” he said. SAWS is able to store water to use during times of drought and high demand, leaving more water in the aquifer and protecting spring flows during critical periods. Cutting pumping to protect the blindcats would af-



fect how SAWS stores water to protect the endangered species targeted by the Habitat Conservation Plan.

"If this particular listing impacts what we can put into our Aquifer Storage and Recovery, it really blows that plan up," he said.

Burton said SAWS wasn't consulted before the proposed listing, and said the proposal is based on "a lack of science."

"They don't have appropriate science on the population size nor on the habitat size," he said. "It's difficult for us to understand how they can propose listing as endangered when they don't know the population size, they've never seen (the fish) in their habitat, and they're using data that's flawed."

The Fish and Wildlife Service said in its proposed rule that the blindcats are "are in danger of extinction throughout their range due to mortality from uptake by groundwater wells," because they get pulled up from their underground home and ejected from wells, which they can't survive.

"While the great depth of their habitat protects them from many human-caused threats, thousands of these fishes were likely lost over the last 100 or more years as groundwater pumping activity increased across Bexar County," Michael Warriner, a supervisory fish and wildlife biologist with the agency, said in a written statement in August.

However, Cruz and Cornyn

said in their letter that there was "excessive use of assumptions and extrapolations from other species" used in the proposed rule, indicating that it was made "without the best science and commercial data available." The fish have never been observed in their habitat, and information about the species' lives is based on inferences from other cavefish species, the letter said.

The senators said the proposed listing was based off documentation of fewer than 100 fish specimens collected from a small number of wells over 100 years, most of which are no longer in production. They also said information being used to support the listing now is the same information available in 1998, when the service determined there wasn't enough information to list the species.

Cruz and Cornyn also said the Fish and Wildlife Service did not

consider the environmental steps taken by the Edwards Aquifer Authority to remain in compliance with water quality regulations and protections.

In written comment to the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Edwards Aquifer Authority said the justification for reclassifying the fish "has substantial technical weaknesses that make listing the species at this time premature and without a rational basis."

The authority said an accurate analysis of the mortality impact of "relatively few wells" in the area cannot be made, and said the agency's analysis of the species mortality rate is based on assumptions that seem unlikely. Of the 11 wells where the species have been located, only three are still active, the agency said, which "is not addressed in the document but seems significant in describing existing threats."



Garold Sneegas, Hendrickson Lab, University of Texas Biodiversity Center

The toothless blindcat is one of two species in the Edwards Aquifer that officials have proposed to list as endangered.