

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife

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SECRETARY HICKEL MOVES TO PROTECT ENDANGERED PUFFISHES

Secretary of the Interior Walter J. Hickel said today that his Department has initiated both immediate and longer range measures to protect several unique and endangered species of fishes in the Amargosa River Basin along the California-Nevada border.

Six kinds of desert pupfish are clinging to a precarious existence in a series of springs and pools in this arid region. They are remnants of the ice age when large lakes were plentiful in the Death Valley area.

Pupfish are diminutive fishes no longer than one's little finger, but aggressive to other fishes and to each other. The males are colorful, with iridescent blues and purples on their backs and sides, and with black bars and dark fin edges. The females are mottled brown, and usually smaller and slimmer than the males.

Pupfishes are omnivorous feeders--algae, plankton, insects, and smaller fishes, alive and dead. They live in water ranging from freezing to well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Some can survive in waters that have up to six times the salt content of sea water. They can live in small pockets, deep holes, and under adverse conditions.

Secretary Hickel said that Interior's National Park Service and the Nevada Fish and Game Department have installed an artificial spawning shelf to be equipped with artificial lighting in Devils Hole as a temporary expedient. This Hole, a detached portion of Death Valley National Monument, is home for a pupfish species (Cyprinodon diabolis) that has survived in this unique environment for thousands of years.

The Secretary also noted that measures are being taken to preserve the fish in nearby School Spring, administered by Interior's Bureau of Land Management (BLM). This facility was set aside and fenced a year ago, but its water supply is dwindling rapidly.

The pupfishes are threatened by lowering water levels and decreasing spring discharge believed caused by irrigation pumping by private interests in adjacent Ash Meadows. The slightest drop in water level in Devils Hole is crucial to the pupfish because its procreation is carried out on ledges only a few inches below the water surface.

BLM is reclassifying public lands in Ash Meadows so that further irrigation development can be limited.

An attempt to transplant some of the Devils Hole pupfish to other locations will be made by Nevada's Department of Fish and Game and the University of Nevada. BLM is improving an alternative spring as a transplant site.

Secretary Hickel said he has directed Commissioner Charles H. Meacham of Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service to establish a Departmental task force to devise a program for preserving pupfish species. The task force is headed by James T. McBroom, an assistant director in Interior's Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife. Other agencies represented are National Park Service, Bureau of Reclamation, Office of the Solicitor, Bureau of Land Management, and the Geological Survey. A corresponding field group also includes representatives of the California Fish and Game Department, Nevada Fish and Game Department, the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, and the University of Michigan.

The task force will promote investigation of ground-water resources in the affected areas to determine the relationship between levels of pools and springs, their water-supply source, and pumping for agricultural and other purposes. A contract for a preliminary hydrologic study by a private consultant has been let.

"The Interior Department will vigorously oppose adverse water use which would endanger the continued existence of these surviving species of fish," Secretary Hickel said.

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