

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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PUPFISH SUIT OFFERS CHANCE TO MATCH WORDS WITH ACTION, ASSISTANT SECRETARY ASSERTS

Nathaniel P. Reed, the Interior Department's Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, today termed the Federal suit filed August 18 to protect the endangered desert pupfish in Nevada a "significant confrontation to protect more than a species, but to determine also if man has the willpower to match words with actions in saving habitat for all living things."

The suit, filed in Federal District Court in Las Vegas, asks for a temporary restraining order to enjoin Spring Meadows, Inc., a farming corporation of Lathrop Wells, Nev., from pumping three wells in the Ash Meadows area of Nevada to prevent the lowering of the water level needed for the pupfish to survive. In recent years, extensive irrigation development has occurred in the area.

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

The National Park Service reported that in Devils Hole, a detached portion of Death Valley National Monument and home for a pupfish species Cyprinodon diabolis, the present rate of water level reduction would completely expose the breeding ledges sometime this fall. There is no evidence that this has ever occurred in geologic time. 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, where its food supply also is found.

Other pupfish pools are located on land administered by Interior's Bureau of Land Management. The pupfish was placed on the endangered species list by the Department's Fish and Wildlife Service in 1967. For the past 15 months an Interior Department task force monitored the pupfish situation. Information it gathered is the basis for the present legal action.

The Federal Government asserts its statutory mandate to protect endangered species and contends that it has a "superior right" to the water of Devils Hole.

In another attempt to perpetuate the species, on August 5 the Nevada Fish and Game Department, in cooperation with the National Park Service, collected 15 live specimens from Devils Hole for transfer to Steinhart Aquarium in San Francisco where efforts will be made to breed the fish in captivity. Past attempts at transplants failed; the fish survived but did not reproduce.

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