DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SOCORRO ISOPOD LISTED AS ENDANGERED

The Socorro isopod, a relative of the common sowbug, has been listed as an endangered species by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director, announced today.

Further study of the life history of this half-inch freshwater crustacean may provide the key to understanding how this and other landlocked relic animals evolved from ancient marine forms.

Last year the New Mexico Department of Fish and Game urged the Service to list the species as endangered. The State filed a formal petition with supporting biological data as provided under the Endangered Species Act. The species was proposed as endangered on December 30, 1977. The final rulemaking appeared in the March 27, 1978, Federal Register.

Because of its ecological and evolutionary position, this species is of tremendous importance to biologists. It is one of only two freshwater species in a family that is otherwise entirely ocean-dwelling. The other species, also limited in size and geographically isolated, occurs in a warm spring in Mexico. The species are very similar and together offer great opportunity for increasing the understanding of species evolution, adaptation to environmental change, and survival.

Presumably the Socorro isopod's ancestors were marine isopods which inhabited oceans that once existed over much of the Western United States. As the oceans receded, this marine isopod was able to adapt to the warm, fresh water that became Sedillo Spring, 3 miles west of Socorro. There it existed for millions of years until the spring was capped and the water piped off in 1949. This destroyed the species' only natural habitat, but some of the isopods made their way into drain pipes and were able to survive. Today, 90 feet of iron drain pipe which leads to an abandoned bath house on private property is the only "home" for the 2,500 remaining members of this species.

Most of the pipes are open, like the gutters which catch water running off the roofs of houses, and are lined with algae, the prime food of Socorro isopods. However, periodic drought and flushing threatens the water level which is normally only a few inches deep.

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