

For Immediate Release: February 28, 2017

Contact:

Catherine Wannamaker, Southern Environmental Law Center, cwannamaker@selcsc.org, 843-720-5270

Haley McKey, Defenders of Wildlife, hmckey@defenders.org, 202-772-0247

Natalie Olson, South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, natalieo@sccl.org, 843-723-8035

Charles Scribner, Black Warrior Riverkeeper, cscribner@blackwarriorriver.org, 205-458-0095

Conservation Groups Join Legal Battle over Protections for Endangered Wildlife

Mobile, AL—Conservation groups have moved to intervene in a federal challenge filed by 18 states, including South Carolina and Alabama, to undo important protections for endangered species.

Representing Black Warrior Riverkeeper, Defenders of Wildlife, and the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, the Southern Environmental Law Center filed a motion to intervene today in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Alabama in support of the rules. These rules allow agencies to more fully protect important and vulnerable “critical habitats” in the Southeast that are necessary for the survival of species such as endangered sea turtles and piping plovers.

“For over four decades the Endangered Species Act has prevented hundreds of species from going extinct, and it has protected the beautiful places and diverse wildlife that make the Southeast so special,” said Catherine Wannamaker, Senior Attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. “This attempt is the first salvo against the Endangered Species Act, so we are taking action to ensure these important protections stay in place for all who care about the South.”

“Habitat loss is the single greatest driver of extinction for most species,” said Jason Rylander, Senior Attorney with Defenders of Wildlife. “This is a direct attack on vital protections for our nation’s most vulnerable wildlife. Critical habitat gives endangered species a leg up on the road to recovery, which is why we have to defend these important protections.”

“These protections are vitally important in preserving our landscapes and ecosystems that make this region unique and that endangered wildlife depend on for survival,” said Natalie Olson, Land Use Program Director and Staff Attorney with the Coastal Conservation League. “In order to protect these rare and threatened habitats across the Southeast—our barrier islands, ocean beaches, wetlands, and forests—it’s imperative that these protections remain in place.”

“Alabama ranks number 1 in the U.S. for freshwater biodiversity, yet pollution and habitat loss put 19% of our freshwater fish species at risk,” said Charles Scribner, Executive Director of Black Warrior Riverkeeper. “Protecting habitat not only defends wildlife but also the millions of Americans who obtain drinking water from the same rivers these species inhabit.”

The states opposing these protections, led by Alabama’s former attorney general Luther Strange, took no legal action for nine months after the new protections were put in place in March 2016. Yet just weeks after the election of President Trump, the states filed a lawsuit to throw out the rules.

Shortly after filing this lawsuit, the states wrote to newly-elected President Trump and urged him to undo these important protections. Last week, the Trump Administration signaled that it might be considering such a rollback by seeking a stay of the litigation to re-examine its position on the rules.

Similarly, recent legislative efforts on the Hill seek to weaken the Endangered Species Act, which currently protects well over a thousand species and their habitats, by making it more difficult to list species or expediting the removal of already listed species. The 114th Congress saw no less than 130 bills and amendments that would have weakened the ESA. Already more than a dozen bills have been introduced in this Congress that would reduce protections for a variety of species.

For 40 years, the Endangered Species Act has helped to preserve 98 percent of the plant and animal species under its protection from extinction. The ESA is responsible for protecting many species in the Southeast, including the American alligator, the brown pelican, the peregrine falcon, and the Atlantic piping plover.

[Click here to read the motion.](#)

To share this release on social media, use this link: blackwarriorriver.org/wildlife-intervention/

U.S. Fish and Wildlife recently proposed the Black Warrior waterdog as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act and proposed designating 669 river miles within 11 tributaries of the Black Warrior River basin as its critical habitat. For a high-resolution photo by Mark Bailey, click here: blackwarriorriver.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/BlackWarriorWaterdog.jpg

###

About Southern Environmental Law Center:

The Southern Environmental Law Center is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year. With nine offices across the region (Charlottesville, VA; Chapel Hill, NC; Atlanta, GA; Charleston, SC; Washington, DC; Birmingham, AL; Nashville, TN; Asheville, NC; and Richmond, VA), SELC is widely recognized as the Southeast's foremost environmental organization and regional leader. SELC works on a full range of environmental issues to protect the South's natural resources and the health and well-being of all the people in our region. SouthernEnvironment.org

About Defenders of Wildlife:

Defenders of Wildlife is dedicated to the protection of all native animals and plants in their natural communities. With more than 1 million members and activists, Defenders of Wildlife is a leading advocate for innovative solutions to safeguard our wildlife heritage for generations to come. For more information, visit defenders.org.

About the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League:

Since 1989, the Coastal Conservation League has been working with communities, businesses, other conservation and citizen groups to protect what we love about the South Carolina coast. From the white sand beaches and pristine marshes to the freshwater swamps and pine savannahs, we focus on the most efficient and effective ways to protect natural habitats, the wildlife that depends on them and the variety of benefits they bring to this state. We also believe that the communities we live in, the air we breathe and the water we depend upon are important and that our quality of life deserves the same high level of attention. To learn more, go to coastalconservaionleague.org

About Black Warrior Riverkeeper:

Black Warrior Riverkeeper is a citizen-based nonprofit organization whose mission is to protect and restore the Black Warrior River and its tributaries. We are advocates for clean water, wildlife habitat, and recreational opportunities throughout the Black Warrior River watershed. To learn about the river and threats to it, visit BlackWarriorRiver.org