

Iconic Alaskan Yellow Cedar Considered For Endangered Protection

AP | By DAN JOLING

Posted: 04/09/2015 1:25 pm EDT Updated: 06/09/2015 5:59 am EDT



ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — An iconic Alaska tree may warrant protection as a threatened or endangered species due to climate warming, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Thursday.

The agency will begin a status review of yellow cedar, a tree revered and used by Native Alaska cultures and valued as of high value to the timber industry.

The decision is great news for the Tongass National Forest and for yellow cedar, said Rebecca Noblin, an attorney in Anchorage for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that petitioned to list the tree.

"We're losing yellow cedar rapidly to climate change, and if we don't start addressing our greenhouse gas emissions, we're going to lose yellow cedars," she said.

Owen Graham, executive director of the Alaska Forest Association, a timber industry trade association, said no listing is warranted.

"It's kind of silly," he said from Ketchikan. "Yellow cedar is not in any danger."

Yellow cedar trees can live more than 1,000 years. Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people use the rot-resistant wood for canoe paddles and totem poles. They can take a lengthwise strip of bark from a living tree for weaving baskets and hats, and as backing in blankets. The tree can compartmentalize the injury and continue growing.

However, the yellow cedar's shallow roots make the tree vulnerable to changes brought on by climate warming, according to petitioners.

In a paper published in 2012, U.S. Forest Service researchers concluded that climate warming has meant less snow and less insulation for the ground. Elevated mortality began around 1880-1890 and peaked in the 1970s and 1980s, according to the study.

Across 781 square miles of Alaska's Panhandle, more than 70 percent of yellow cedar trees have died because of root freeze induced by climate change, according to the listing petition.

Owen, of the forest association, disputed the Forest Service study and called its conclusions a hypothesis. Experts dispute the conclusions, he said. Die-off events are sporadic and "certainly not a crisis" that will affect all trees.

"It doesn't prevent the young growth from coming in behind it and being healthy," he said.

A listing would require federal agencies to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service to make sure their actions don't jeopardize the species. The law also requires designating critical habitat, and bans destruction or "adverse modification" of the habitat.

Under endangered species law, the agency has 12 months from submission of the petition to conduct a status review, which considers information and public comment to determine whether a species warrants listing.

If the management agency decides that a listing is warranted, it has one more year to collect additional public comment before making a final decision.

A yellow cedar listing would be the first for an Alaska tree and only the second plant listed for the state.