

Adding to endangered list is a bad idea

Adding the Virgin spinedace to the threatened or endangered species list, as recently proposed by the Center for Biological Diversity, would result in heavy costs to the residents of our community and few guarantees for the fish population. The future of collaborative efforts among various agencies in furtherance of species protection and the diversion of scarce tax dollars from necessary programs would follow from such action.

Why would this group and its representative propose an endangered listing if it doesn't benefit the species in question? Motivations may include funding since many environmental groups have garnered significant dollars from you, the taxpayer, through legal fees awarded in lawsuits filed under the Endangered Species Act. Or the listing could provide personal benefits, such as hoped-for changes that impact an individual's private property or business interests.

When funds are diverted to legal challenges instead of on-the-ground improvements, society as a whole pays a heavy price. The benefits to the species are reduced, and costs are increased. Fewer voluntary contributions are available when there is no collaboration, so ever more burden falls on the taxpayer.

The fact is the Virgin spinedace is already the subject of a state conservation agreement, first executed in 1995 and later incorporated as part of the collaborative process established as the Virgin River Resource Management and Recovery Program (Virgin River Program) in 2002. In the years since 1995, the Virgin spinedace has acquired approximately 29 additional miles of habitat and increased in population. Several recovery goals have been met, including:

- » The re-establishment of populations in Quail Creek, Leeds Creek and portions of the Santa Clara River and the Beaver Dam Wash.
- » Property acquisition and protection in many locations.
- » Water acquisition in depleted reaches.
- » General protection activities through stream alteration permits.

These benefits were achieved because of collaboration among local, state and federal agencies, environmental groups and others. To accomplish this effort, the Virgin River Program was established by three funding partners, the Washington County Water Conservancy District, the Utah Department of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The alternative to collaboration is the type of regulatory action proposed by the Center for Biological Diversity as noted in The Spectrum's article on Nov. 21. The heavy hand of the law may be attractive to those who have no understanding of or concern for the public interest represented by the Virgin River Program and the Washington County Habitat Conservation Plan. Legal burdens bring no funding and inspire little or no effort by those who experience this forced, top-down imposition of power. The net result is less activity to benefit the species.

We support U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in collaborative efforts and strongly oppose this assault on species protection represented by the actions of the Center for Biological Diversity.

This column was provided by Washington County commissioners Alan Gardner, Jim Eardley and Denny Drake, and Ronald Thompson, general manager of the Washington County Water Conservancy District.