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Federal judge strikes down Fish and Wildlife ruling that hellbenders are not endangered

By Ad Crable, Bay Journal News Service

A federal judge has ordered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to take another look at its 2019 decision denying endangered status protection for the eastern hellbender, the nation's largest aquatic salamander that is found in low numbers in all Chesapeake Bay drainage states.

On Sept. 5, Judge Lewis Liman in a U.S. District Court in New York voided the federal agency's 2019 decision. Liman ruled that one of the agency's determinations that hellbenders were not threatened or endangered because of emerging conservation and reintroduction efforts could not be assumed to head off population declines.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Middle Susquehanna Riverkeeper Association, Lower Susquehanna Riverkeeper, Waterkeeper Alliance and Waterkeeper Chesapeake had sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2021 over denying endangered protection status for the hellbender, Pennsylvania's state amphibian.

"There are few creatures as symbolically significant to our work in the Susquehanna River watershed as the eastern hellbender, a misunderstood and underappreciated species that is a critically important litmus test of water quality," Middle Susquehanna Riverkeeper John Zaktansky said after the court ruling.

Eastern hellbenders are found in 15 states. Their biggest threats are degraded water quality and sedimentation that fills in nests and breeding areas.

Information submitted in the application that seeks to declare hellbenders endangered said that the number of known healthy populations in the U.S. had declined by 61% and that 63% of the remaining populations were in decline.

The Fish & Wildlife Service had countered that conservation efforts would be sufficient to prevent hellbenders from becoming endangered throughout a significant portion of its range.

Ad Crable is a Bay Journal staff writer based in Pennsylvania. He can be reached at acrable@bayjournal.com. This article was first published September 11, 2023, on BayJournal.com and was distributed by the Bay Journal News Service.

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A young adult eastern hellbender, pulled from the rocky headwaters of a Pennsylvania stream. (Photo by [Kristof Zyskowski](#)/CC BY 4.0)

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