



PRESS RELEASE

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Delaware Riverkeeper Network Files Petition Urging Special Status for Delaware River Atlantic Sturgeon Due To Nearing Threat of Extinction

Philadelphia, PA: The Delaware Riverkeeper Network filed a Petition with the U.S. Department of Commerce and the National Marine Fisheries Service urging that the Delaware River population of Atlantic Sturgeon be recognized as its own Distinct Population Segment (DPS) pursuant to the federal Endangered Species Act. According to the organization, this recognition will provide increased protections essential for preventing the genetically unique population known to only exist in the Delaware River, from going extinct.

When the Atlantic Sturgeon of the Delaware River were listed as endangered in 2012, along with all other populations nationwide save for one that was identified as threatened, they were identified as being a part of a DPS called the New York Bight. The New York Bight DPS includes both the Delaware River population of Atlantic sturgeon, as well as those that inhabit the Hudson River. The Delaware Riverkeeper Network petition demonstrates that combining the Delaware River and Hudson River populations into a single DPS distorts the status and recovery of the Delaware River sturgeon which are at perilously low levels. According to the petition:

- ⇒ The Delaware River population of Atlantic Sturgeon has been identified by scientific study as being genetically unique. And while estimates placed the population size at 180,000 adult females in the 1890s, recent estimates place the annual spawning population at less than 250 spawning adults, that includes both males and females. This represents at least a 1,000-fold decrease in the Delaware River population.
- ⇒ “The misguided decision to lump the genetically unique and independent populations from the Hudson and the Delaware Rivers into a single DPS stands as a major barrier to recovery for the dwindling Delaware River population.”

- ⇒ “[T]he Hudson River’s population of Atlantic sturgeon is estimated to be among the largest remaining U.S. populations and has seen important signs of recovery in the last decade. By contrast, the Delaware River population is among the most imperiled in the world. Combining the two rivers into a single DPS and management unit undermines the ability of all government agencies to protect and recover both populations, and most certainly compromises the ability to properly reflect upon, and protect, the Delaware River population.”
- ⇒ “A key consequence of the decision to lump the Hudson River and Delaware River populations into a single DPS is that permitting decisions and consultation under the Endangered Species Act allow for expansion of the unsustainable “take” and increased mortality of Delaware River sturgeon because it is nearly impossible to trigger a “jeopardy” decision when the Hudson River population is expanding. Even if the Delaware River population were forecast to go extinct, the DPS can be said to remain viable because of the stronger Hudson River population.”

“Time is running out for the Atlantic Sturgeon of the Delaware River. If our government agencies do not step up and put in place critical protections from ongoing and increasing river pollution, fossil fuels, dredging, proposed port projects, and the new political pressure for LNG exports that science shows will and are inflicting devastating harm, then the Delaware River’s Atlantic Sturgeon population could be lost from this earth in our lifetime. Once they are lost we can never get them back,” says **Maya van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper and leader of the Delaware Riverkeeper Network, the organization that filed petition.** Explains van Rossum, “Right now, because the Delaware River Atlantic Sturgeon are lumped in with the Hudson River Atlantic Sturgeon for Endangered Species Act decision-making, the dire imminence of extinction for the Delaware River’s genetically unique population is masked. The Hudson River population is advancing towards recovery, their numbers are going up; but the Delaware River population is on a march towards extinction. By lumping the two populations together, government and industry are able to hide the devastating consequences of their actions in semantics and numbers, continuing business as usual. We still have a chance to save our Delaware River Atlantic Sturgeon, but time is fast running out.”

The decision to grant the Delaware Riverkeeper Network petition should impact a number of significant and ongoing decisions such as: at what level the US EPA will set oxygen standards for the reach of the Delaware River key to propagation of the Atlantic Sturgeon; if and/or how to address ship strikes, and; decisions regarding LNG export proposals and new port facilities proposed for construction and operation, both of which impact vessel traffic and increase the risk of lethal ship strikes for the sturgeon.

“Currently all National Marine Fisheries Service does is render a determination that a proposed project or decision ‘may adversely affect, but is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence’ of the Delaware River Atlantic Sturgeon. That does nothing for the sturgeon, or all the people who care about them,” added van Rossum.

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