

No critical habitat for this once-common bumblebee

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Rusty patched bumblebee. Public Domain Pictures

The Fish and Wildlife Service today declined to designate critical habitat for the rusty patched bumblebee, an endangered species whose extensive court record could now grow longer.

Pressed by litigation to make a long-delayed decision, the federal agency determined that it would "not be prudent" to identify critical habitat for the sorely depleted bee population.

"The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of habitat is not the primary threat to the species, and the availability of habitat does not limit the conservation of the rusty patched bumble bee now, nor will it in the future," FWS **stated**.

Once common throughout the midwestern and northeastern United States, the rusty patched bumblebee has since vanished from 87% of the counties it formerly inhabited. Habitat loss, pesticide use, climate change and disease have all been identified as threats to its continued existence.

One prior lawsuit pressed FWS to list the bee under the Endangered Species Act, which happened in January 2017. A second suit challenged the Trump administration's effort to delay implementation of the listing. A third sought to compel critical habitat designation ([*Greenwire*](#), Sept. 25, 2019).

Critical habitat is defined as habitat with "physical or biological features essential to the conservation of the species and which may require special management considerations or protection."

The rusty patched bumblebee favors woodlands, grasslands and gardens in Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Ohio, Tennessee and Wisconsin.

When FWS listed the rusty patched bumblebee in the final week of the Obama administration, the agency said that while designation of critical habitat "might be prudent," it was "not determinable" at the time. That triggered a one-year deadline, which officials missed.

"We have now analyzed more complete data and have a better understanding of the life-history needs of the rusty patched bumble bee," the agency said today.

FWS said that while the bee is no longer present in 20 of the 31 states and provinces where it occurred historically, suitable habitat is "still widespread" in these areas.

The agency further described the bee as a "generalist forager" that does not depend on certain species of plants for nectar and pollen and likely uses woodlands and woodland edges as well as other areas for overwintering and nesting.

"Across the historical range of the species, there appears to be abundant suitable habitat for rusty patched bumble bees to occupy in the future should their numbers rebound," FWS said.

FWS added that through population mapping, it is already "focusing conservation activities on the most essential areas to prevent further loss of colonies ... and preventing inadvertent harm to the species."