

# Feds reach settlement regarding endangered species

By Felicity Barringer, New York Times

The Interior Department, facing an avalanche of petitions and lawsuits over proposed endangered species designations, said Tuesday that it had negotiated a settlement under which it will make decisions on 251 species over the next six years.

Under the agreement, species that the department has already deemed to be at potential risk but whose status remains in limbo, including the New England cottontail and the greater sage grouse of the West, will take priority in the Fish and Wildlife Service workload.

If approved by a federal judge, the settlement would bring about the most sweeping change in the enforcement of the Endangered Species Act since the 1990s, when the department streamlined a procedure for protecting the habitats that endangered species need to recover.

The backlog of more than 250 cases resulted from lawsuits and petitions filed by environmental groups, a strategy for forcing the Fish and Wildlife Service to be more assertive about fulfilling its wildlife-protection mandate. Over the past four years, the service has fielded requests for listing more than 1,230 species as endangered or threatened.

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