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Rare Montana Plant Moves Closer to Endangered Species Protection

Mining Threatens Thick-Leaf Bladderpod

BILLINGS, *Mont.*— In response to a 2021 [petition](#) from the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service [announced today](#) that the thick-leaf bladderpod may qualify for protection under the Endangered Species Act. The Service will now begin a full status review of the species.

This rare plant is found only in southern Montana's Pryor Desert, where it is under imminent threat from gypsum mining.

"This is an important step for this tiny, imperiled plant that lives only in this small, unique area of Montana," said Kristine Akland at the Center for Biological Diversity. "If the Service lists the bladderpod, the species and its habitat will receive much needed protection from the deadly threat of proposed gypsum mining."

In 2015 the Bureau of Land Management designated 2,606 acres of the Pryor Foothills as an "area of critical environmental concern" to protect significant cultural and biological values, including the large concentration of sensitive plant species like the bladderpod.

Because this is an "area of critical environmental concern," damaging activities like gypsum mining should not occur. In 2015 the BLM recommended that the area be withdrawn from mineral leasing. But under the Trump administration, that did not occur.

"We hope that this decision will prompt the BLM to protect the Pryor Mountain Desert and all of its biological treasures from future mining," said Peter Lesica, conservation chair of the Montana Native Plant Society.

Dick Walton, spokesperson for the Pryors Coalition, said, "This is a positive step toward recognition of the unique and vulnerable Pryor Mountain ecosystems."

The thick-leaf bladderpod is found on broad plains dominated by sparse vegetation and grows in cryptobiotic soil crusts — living soils made of blue-green algae, lichens, mosses, micro fungi and bacteria. This small plant is only a few inches in size and has tiny, yellow flowers that bloom for a few weeks in June.

Gypsum mining and exploration would damage the bladderpod by removing vegetation and degrading the soil through drilling, excavation, road building and road traffic. The exploration would also increase the threat of invasive plants and off-road vehicle activity driven by improvements to existing roads. This unique habitat of cryptobiotic crust is highly sensitive to disturbances, and the mining project could lead to the extinction of the thick-leaf bladderpod unless the plant receives protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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