

Who's trying to save rusty patched bumblebee from extinction? Not federal officials.

By **Lori Ann Burd**

When my Soviet refugee parents moved our family to Deerfield, access to excellent public education, not wild places, was at the top of their agenda.

But I've always sought refuge in nature, and as a teen was delighted to discover Somme Prairie in nearby Northbrook.

There, in a tiny pocket of nature wedged between the freeway and the tollway, I discovered a world teeming with life. Amid the wildflowers and insects, the prairie was alive with the buzz of bumblebees.

Today, many of those bumblebees have virtually disappeared. One of the bees in the worst trouble is the rusty patched bumblebee. That's why in January 2017, following a legal petition and two lawsuits by conservation groups, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed it as endangered. That decision enabled the agency to bring the full weight of the Endangered Species Act to prevent the bee's extinction.

At least, that's the way it's supposed to work.

Although the bee's population has declined by 87%, five years later, federal officials have consistently refused to do what it takes to reverse this bee's plunge toward extinction.

The rusty patched bumblebee was once widely found across the upper Midwest

and Northeast, but now inhabits only 8% of its historical range. Close to a third of its 69 remaining populations are in Indiana and Illinois.

The Fish and Wildlife Service described it as "so imperiled that every remaining population is important for the continued existence of the species."

But the agency's lack of action doesn't show a lot of care for what's left of the species here.

For starters, the Fish and Wildlife Service refused to designate any critical habitat for the bee, despite the fact that this crucial tool has played a key role in the Endangered Species Act, preventing the extinction of nearly 99% of protected species. In response, we've joined with other conservation groups in suing to obtain critical habitat for the bee. The Biden administration is, sadly, currently defending this Trump-era decision in court.

While the continued decline of the bee magnifies the importance of remnant habitat, like that found in Somme Prairie, the Fish and Wildlife Service has routinely refused to protect these special places.

After the rusty patched bumblebee was discovered at Bell Bowl Prairie in summer 2021, the Fish and Wildlife Service did not use its authority to insist the site be spared from bulldozers for Rockford's airport



A rusty patched bumblebee is part of an insect collection of the Field Museum.

E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

expansion. Instead, regulators ignored basic science and simply asked the airport to postpone construction until November, as if destroying that entire habitat during overwintering season somehow made it OK.

The Fish and Wildlife Service also greenlighted Longmeadow Parkway, using flawed science to deny the reality that the site was suitable habitat likely used by the bee, again fighting conservationists.

In addition, the agency has refused to take any action to protect the bee from pesticides, despite noting that pesticides,

particularly neonicotinoid insecticides, are one of the leading causes of its decline.

Many individuals and institutions have worked to protect the rusty patched bumblebee by planting flowers to nourish it and preserving patches of habitat. These efforts are of vital importance.

But every time the Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency in charge of saving it, has come to a decision point, it's chosen to ignore the bee's critical status, squandering five years that could have been crucial for jump-starting the bee's recovery.

Without question, time is literally running out for the rusty patched bumblebee.

Extinction is not inevitable for this bee. Protecting its habitat and keeping it safe from pesticides will go a long way toward its recovery. But if it does go extinct, it will be because the Fish and Wildlife Service refused to protect it.

We call on the Biden administration to stop fighting efforts to give this bumblebee the protection it needs.

Extinction is a political choice with political solutions. The Fish and Wildlife Service can still change course to show the vision and courage to save it. Will it?

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