

Rare plant found only around Shasta Lake gets state protection

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The Shasta snow wreath
Cherilyn Burton/California Department Of Fish And Wildlife

California regulators listed a rare species of plant that's only been found around Shasta Lake as threatened this week. That change could hamper future efforts to raise the height of the Shasta Dam.

The California Fish and Game Commission decided to list a small shrub with white flowers called the Shasta snow wreath as threatened under the state Endangered Species Act on Wednesday.

The Shasta snow wreath has been found in just 26 locations around the lake.

It's thought to have evolved as long as 34 to 56 million years ago, and grew across the Pacific Northwest. But the plant has since retreated to small, isolated pockets around the lake.

The rare plant wasn't discovered by scientists until 1992. It looks similar to other common shrubs in the area, and the U.S. Forest Service says the flowers – a common way to identify a plant – last for a very short period. The snow wreath is also often found growing among poison oak, which may help explain why the plant has managed to hide in plain sight for so long.

During the Trump administration, there was a push to raise the height of the Shasta Dam. Trump signed an executive order in early 2020 to direct the development of expanding water supplies in California. That includes the Central Valley Project, in which Shasta Lake is one of the most northern reservoirs.

Isabel Baer with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife said if the dam were raised, it would directly impact at least half of the known Shasta snow wreath populations.

"There has been a lot of environmental study done on that area," Baer said. "And those did include impacts to species in the area. So we did take that into account, into our status review. And I think that's part of why our recommendation was that it was threatened."

The dam raising proposal has stalled for now, but any future efforts could see pushback involving this now-protected plant species.

"I don't know that the listing of Shasta snow wreath in itself would be sufficient to say this project can no longer happen," said Baer. "There is a way to obtain permission to take that species and mitigate for those impacts."

But listing the plant under the California Endangered Species Act may not do enough to help prevent a project happening on federal land.

"The federal [ESA] would address federal projects on federal lands like Shasta Dam," said Len Lindstrand, a Botanist who's done extensive research into the Shasta snow wreath. "But the state one doesn't."

The snow wreath is also under consideration to be listed under the federal Endangered Species Act, but that process has been much slower. The proposal received a [90-day finding](#) from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in March of 2021 which approved a 12-month review of the plant, however that review hasn't been completed after almost two years.

Lindstrand said one of the concerns with state and federal protections for a plant means there's more bureaucracy that's required even for conservation purposes if they

resulted in accidental snow wreath mortality — for example removing invasive blackberry which currently grows around the snow wreath and eventually kills it.

“But there’s no way, especially if this thing got listed federally, that anyone’s gonna get in here and do anything to help it,” Lindstrand said. “Because you’re gonna have to take some. When it’s all intertwined with Blackberry you’re gonna have a little impact on some.”

Lindstrand said the state listing does elevate the plant to a greater level of attention, but the protections alone doesn’t mean the snow wreath has a chance at recovering.



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After graduating from Oregon State University, Roman came to JPR as part of the Charles Snowden Program for Excellence in Journalism in 2019. He then joined Delaware Public Media as a Report For America fellow before returning to the west coast.

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