



For Immediate Release, March 18, 2026

Contact: Kierán Suckling, (520) 275-5960, ksuckling@biologicaldiversity.org
Brett Hartl, (202) 817-8121, bhartl@biologicaldiversity.org

Emergency Lawsuit Challenges Trump's Unlawful Extinction Committee Meeting

WASHINGTON— The Center for Biological Diversity filed an [emergency lawsuit](#) today against Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum in federal district court in Washington, D.C., to prevent him from convening the Endangered Species Committee, also known as the Extinction Committee, on March 31.

Burgum wants the committee to approve the extinction of the extremely endangered Rice's whale and the killing of endangered sea turtles and sperm whales by overriding a National Marine Fisheries Service requirement for Gulf of Mexico oil and gas industry to drive ships at safe speeds in the eastern Gulf and monitor the location of whales to avoid strikes and deaths.

"Burgum's extinction committee is immoral, illegal and unnecessary," said Kierán Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity. "There's no emergency, no legal basis to convene the committee, and no legal way to approve the extinction of Rice's whales. This sham is nothing more than Burgum posturing for Trump and saving the fossil fuel industry a few dollars by allowing its boats to drive faster and more recklessly."

The Endangered Species Act's Extinction Committee is very rarely convened because the law sets strict, narrow standards for its invocation. It was last convened in 1991 under George H.W. Bush.

The committee can only convene 1) in response to an application made within 90 days of the completion of a biological opinion, which 2) concludes that an endangered species' existence is being "jeopardized" and there is no "reasonable and prudent alternative" to the action. It must 3) hold a public hearing, including witness testimony, and 4) be presided over by an administrative law judge. Burgum's so-called "emergency" Extinction Committee meeting violates all these requirements.

Ten months ago, the National Marine Fisheries Service [issued a biological opinion](#) concluding that oil industry ship strikes were jeopardizing the existence of the extremely endangered Rice's whale, which lives only in the Gulf of Mexico, and harming endangered sperm whales and sea turtles. This followed an earlier 2020 opinion also reaching the same conclusion.

The Rice's whale population collapsed after the Deepwater Horizon spill and is today only at about 51 animals.

The agency therefore established "reasonable and prudent alternatives" requiring the industry to drive boats at slower speeds within the whale's core habitat in the eastern Gulf and to monitor the location of Rice's whales to avoid accidentally striking and killing them. The biological opinion does not prohibit or limit the amount of oil and gas that can be drilled.

Knowing the extinction committee is a sham and will be opposed by most Americans, Burgum is not holding a public hearing with public participation as required by the Endangered Species Act and hasn't appointed a professional administrative law judge to oversee it. He has [instead announced](#) that the dog and pony show will be live-streamed on YouTube.

"Slowing boat speeds is not just reasonable, it's easy, and it's the absolute minimum the oil and gas industry can do to save Rice's whales from extinction," said Suckling. "Burgum's real goal with this fake 'crisis' is to test the limits of his power to needlessly and illegally kill endangered species just as ICE is Trump's way to test the limits of his power to brutalize and kill American citizens. He won't succeed. We won 90% of our suits during Trump's first term, and we'll win this one too."

On March 16 the Center sent a [letter](#) to all six members of the Extinction Committee demanding that documents about the scope of the exemption be provided to the public and that the meeting be open to the public. The Center has not received a response.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.8 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

[More Press Releases](#)

Tags: [trump-response-lawsuit](#)

Programs: [Government Affairs](#) | [Trump Response](#)

[View for Email](#)