

 development

Lizard woes might hinder local projects



Jay Calderon, The Desert Sun

A fringe-toed lizard keeps a low profile in the sand near Cook Street.

Palmwood hearing

The LAFCO meeting starts at 9:30 a.m. today and will be held at the Eastern Municipal Water District headquarters in Perris. The \$1.8 billion, 75-year Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan would allow the valley to nearly triple its population to 1.1 million while setting aside land to protect 27 species, including endangered Peninsular bighorn sheep and the threatened fringe-toed lizard.

[Denise Goolsby](#)

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Gap in species protection policy could create headaches for builders

A permit that has allowed the Coachella Valley to grow over the past two decades while protecting a threatened lizard is in jeopardy of expiring next month, worrying planners who had hoped to have an expanded permit plan ready to take its place.

"We haven't had to worry about this for 18 years. Now we have to worry about this," said John Wohlmuth, executive director of the Coachella Valley Association of Governments.

His agency is leading the charge to protect the lizard and 26 other species while allowing the valley to nearly triple its population to 1.1 million by build-out in 2066.

The Coachella Valley fringe-toed lizard permit has been extended six times since 2000, but the California Department of Fish and Game said as recently as May that it has no plans to extend it again.

If CVAG's multiple species plan isn't ready to replace it by Aug. 31 - a nearly certain scenario - all projects would be required to obtain environmental permits. That process could take six months or longer.

Among the projects that could be delayed are Interstate 10 interchanges, including at Gene Autry Trail/Palm Drive.

"The impact on highway interchanges and any delay that would be generated by loss of a permit would be of a concern to us," said Eric Haley, Riverside County Transportation Commission executive director.

Steve Robbins, general manager-chief engineer for the Coachella Valley Water District, said without an environmental permit plan, project-by-project approval will create a backlog at the Department of Fish and Game, creating much-longer than usual delays in construction projects.

"It throws a real big question mark into any construction that has to go on," Robbins said.

CVAG had hoped to have its multi-species plan in place by late summer or early fall, but it appears December is more likely.

The agency unveiled a valleywide plan in early 2006 that required all cities to sign on.

Desert Hot Springs opted out, citing concerns over two projects it hoped would be part of its growth - a golf course project and a College of the Desert campus.

So CVAG revised its plan to exclude Desert Hot Springs and had circulated the new plan this year with hopes of it becoming effective this fall.

On Tuesday, the Desert Hot Springs City Council issued a preliminary decision to rejoin the plan, a move CVAG welcomed.

Katie Barrows, director of environmental resources for CVAG, said Wednesday the agency still wants to pass the plan later this year and then will amend it to include Desert Hot Springs.

Another wrinkle

Desert Hot Springs officials on April 26 received approval to annex 2,114 acres for the Palmwood Golf Club.

That move didn't sit well with Fish and Game officials, who hoped the land would be conserved.

Shortly after, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club sued the annex-granting body - the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission - to challenge the decision.

Today, LAFCO will hear from valley, Riverside County, Coachella Valley Water District and public works officials asking the commission to reconsider its decision.

If LAFCO reverses its decision, the multi-species plan could be completed by the end of the year, Barrows said. CVAG negotiations with Desert Hot Springs include provisions regarding the annexations.

If the agency sticks to its original vote, it's a whole different story.

"That creates a much more challenging situation," Barrows said.

If land included in the multi-species plan changes hands, revisions would be required that would need to be revisited by participating bodies. And that could take as long as a year, Barrows said.