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Tiny Lizard That Calls Death Valley National Park Home Could Be Added to ESA List



Photograph by Jim Rorabaugh, USFWS

The Mojave fringe-toed lizard, which can be found in Death Valley National Park, could soon gain protection under the Endangered Species Act. USFWS Photo.

by Kurt Repanshek

A small lizard that skitters about Death Valley National Park might soon gain protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The Center for Biological Diversity back in April 2006 petitioned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to consider the Mojave fringe-toed lizard for ESA protection. On Thursday, January 10, the center announced that the

FWS will begin a one-year study to determine whether such designation is needed.

The Amargosa River population of the Mojave fringe-toed lizard occupies three dunes in and adjacent to Death Valley National Park. Scientists determined that the Amargosa population is genetically distinct from other populations of the species, which allows the Fish and Wildlife Service to protect it as a “distinct population segment.”

“Off-road vehicles come at this highly adapted and unique lizard from all sides — they degrade its habitat, destroy its food source, and trample lizards directly,” said Chris Kassar, a wildlife biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity. “This is a rare and vulnerable creature that simply cannot co-exist with such off-road vehicle excess. The lizard desperately needs the protection of the Endangered Species Act to avoid extinction.”

According to the center, the lizard can evade predators and extreme midday heat by using its fringed toes to swiftly bury itself in the fine sands of the dunes it inhabits. However, it says the lizard remains close enough to the surface that it is still vulnerable to death or injury from off-road vehicles’ sand-digging tires.