

Snake may get protection

Group asks federal agency to list rare Ariz. serpent as endangered

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has decided a small, rare Arizona snake may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The federal agency made the announcement this week in response to a 2004 petition from the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

In that petition, the conservation group says the brightly colored Tucson shovel-nosed snake is a victim of agricultural expansion and urban sprawl.

“I can’t see why it wouldn’t be protected,” said Noah Greenwald, the center’s science director. “It’s clearly endangered.”

The Tucson shovel-nosed snake used to be a common species in northeastern Pima County and southern Pinal and Maricopa counties, Greenwald said. But it hasn’t been seen near its habitat in Pima County since 1979, he said.

The snake feeds mostly on scorpions, beetle larvae and spiders. It uses its shovel-shaped nose to “swim” through sandy soils in low, flat areas, land that is ripe for other uses.

“The most developable land between Phoenix and Tucson is its primary habitat,” Greenwald said.

Fish and Wildlife’s decision to review the snake’s status triggers a 60-day public-comment period; a decision on whether to include the reptile on the endangered-species

list could be made in the next 12 to 15 months, said Jim Rorabaugh, a biologist with the service.

The department is also reviewing the status of the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl, which commonly nests in saguaro cactuses. The bird was listed as endangered in 1997 but removed from the list in 2006.

Several conservation groups have petitioned to have it relisted as a protected species.