

## Lizard gets second chance at life

U.S. Fish and Wildlife: A judge says the agency must again decide if the reptile is endangered.

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By JENNIFER BOWLES / The Press-Enterprise

Responding to a court order, U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials said Wednesday they will again consider adding an Inland reptile to the federal endangered species list.

A federal judge ordered the agency to consider the shrinking habitat of the flat-tailed horned lizard when making a decision.

The wildlife agency, the judge said in recent rulings, violated federal law in 2003 when it withdrew a proposal to declare the lizard a threatened species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act without taking into account loss of habitat.

U.S. District Judge Neil Wake in Phoenix ordered the agency to make a new decision by April 30.

The small, sand-dwelling reptile has two rows of fringed scales on each side of its body. It was widespread across the Coachella Valley, southwestern Arizona and northwestern Mexico, but now only lives in pockets. They feed on harvester ants, consuming up to 200 each day.

Environmental groups have long pressed in court to get federal protection for the lizard to protect its habitat from harmful activities so the population can rebound.



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The sand-dwelling flat-tailed horned lizard once lived across the Coachella Valley, southwestern Arizona and northwestern Mexico, but now resides in small areas.

"They're one of the neatest lizards we have, and they're a very unique part of desert wildlife," said Daniel Patterson, of the Center for Biological Diversity.

Giving the lizard federal protection could limit activities that harm the animal and its habitat.

In the Coachella Valley, the lizard is one of several imperiled species that will be covered under a multi-species habitat plan that, when approved, would allow for the widening of Interstate 10 and its overpasses in the eastern valley without any obstacles, said Ed Kibbey, executive director of the Building Industry Association's desert chapter.

A 2003 report by state and federal agencies said threats elsewhere include sand and gravel mining, off-roading, and military and U.S. Border Patrol activities, which include smoothing out dirt roads by dragging tires so tracks left by illegal immigrants can be easily observed.

Andy Yuen, deputy field supervisor of Fish and Wildlife's Carlsbad office, said he couldn't predict the outcome of an analysis of lost habitat. He said agency biologists would look at maps included in the 2003 report to help determine the significance of the loss.

In that report, Wendy Hodges, who did post-doctorate research at UC Riverside's Center for Conservation Biology, estimated the lizard had lost 49 percent of its historical range due to agriculture, urban sprawl and other activities. She said Wednesday that the percentage has grown since then.

In the Coachella Valley, only an isolated population is known to exist, near Thousand Palms in the Coachella Valley Preserve.

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