

The Associated Press
Associated Press

RIVERSIDE, Calif. (AP) - U.S. Fish and Wildlife officials may add the flat-tailed horned lizard to the federal endangered species list.

Habitat for the sand-dwelling lizard, which once thrived across the Coachella Valley, southwestern Arizona and northwestern Mexico, has now shrunk to a few, small areas. A federal judge ordered the agency to consider the shrinking habitat when making a decision.

U.S. District Judge Neil Wake in Phoenix said the wildlife agency

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.

Wake ordered the agency to make a new decision by April 30.

Environmentalists have been pressing for federal protection for the lizard.

"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.

Wendy Hodges, who did postdoctorate research at the University of California, Riverside, Center for Conservation Biology, estimated the lizard has lost 49 percent of its historical range due to agriculture, urban sprawl and other activities.

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