

YUMA SUN – Sept 21 05

Planners hope lizard ruling doesn't affect proposed highway

YUMA, Ariz. (AP) — Traffic planners hope a proposed commercial highway here isn't held up by a federal judge's ruling on a lizard.

The planned highway would cross the flat-tailed horned lizard's habitat as it stretches from a proposed commercial port of entry in San Luis, Ariz., to Interstate 8.

Concerns arose because the judge found that the flat-tailed horned lizard should be reclassified as a threatened species.

"My hope is that this does not affect the highway," said Yuma County Supervisor Casey Prochaska, vice chairwoman of the Yuma Metropolitan Planning Organization executive board. "When we started this process we considered the lizard as endangered and I believe we've done everything required in order to protect the lizard and its habitat."

The flat-tailed horned lizard, one of seven horned lizard species, can be found in the extreme southwest corner of Arizona, which includes much of Yuma County, as well as in the Coachella, Imperial and Borrego valleys in California.

It also lives in northeastern Baja California and northwest Sonora.

Daniel Patterson, a desert ecologist for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity, said there's a problem with the planned highway's route because it's been planned without an environmental impact statement.

Patterson said he isn't against construction of the highway, but would rather see it take a different route, through some of the agricultural areas that have already been taken from the lizard's habitat.

"The route cuts right through the lizard's habitat area and could really knock down a large number of the species," Patterson said. "I think they can avoid having to do an (environmental impact statement) if they selected another route. Environmentally, there are other routes that could be used that already have much more disturbance."