



## U.S. review of snake's status could stall growth in Pinal

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The next place where development meets endangered species in Arizona could be Pinal County.

And the next pygmy owl could be a little-known but colorful snake subspecies that stretches a little longer than a foot.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says listing of the Tucson shovel-nosed snake as a threatened or endangered species may be justified.

Responding to a petition from Tucson's Center for Biological Diversity, the service announced Wednesday that it will start a review of the snake's status.

The service should decide whether to propose protection for the snake during the 2008-09 federal fiscal year, which starts in October, said service biologist Jim Rorabaugh.

"We find that the petition presents substantial scientific or commercial information indicating that listing" may be warranted, the service said this week in the Federal Register.

It's the desert scrublands along Interstate 10 and environs in Pinal

County lying between Pima and Maricopa counties that the snake finds most hospitable.

Many of the same areas have also been targeted for future growth, particularly thousands of acres of state land near Picacho Peak, Florence and the Apache Junction area.

Pinal County is projected to grow from 313,000 people today to 600,000 by 2015.

The small town of Maricopa, lying within the snake's home range, is expected to grow from 4,855 people in 2004 to 350,000 by 2025.

One of the biggest areas in which the snake and development could compete is a 275-square-mile spread of state land south of Apache Junction where the State Land Department planned a major development.

Two-thirds of the proposed Superstition Vistas development lies within the snake's home range, the Fish and Wildlife Service says.

But State Land Department officials say they're willing to seriously consider a conservation plan that would balance growth in that area

with land protection for the snake and nearly 20 other species.

This type of snake hasn't been seen in Pima County since 1979, when one was spotted in the Avra Valley near Avra Valley and Sanders roads.

It has been surveyed for the past few years in Central Arizona and been seen mainly in Pinal County, said Phil Rosen, a University of Arizona herpetologist who helped the Center for Biological Diversity to prepare the listing petition.

"It's already gone from most of Maricopa County," Rosen said.

The Southern Arizona Home Builders Association said in a statement, "The development industry is not surprised by this action by the radical Center for Biological Diversity, based on their track record of stopping growth at every opportunity."

"This issue is not about protecting species. It is simply another attack on property rights that ultimately increases home prices and property taxes for all residents of Pima County."

Rosen said the snake is almost certain to go extinct if some of this land isn't protected.

“If land is urbanized or turned into agriculture, the snake is gone,” he said. “There aren’t any snakes like this living in urban areas.”

If the snake does get federal protection, that can mean federal reviews, delays, red tape and conservation requirements for new development that needs a federal permit to build in its important habitat.

Such reviews, lasting a few months to two years when the pygmy owl was listed as endangered, often lead to requirements that a developer set aside land on which an endangered species lives or could live.

Another option is for a landowner to seek a federal hab-itat protection plan, in which the owner would agree to set aside land for conservation in exchange for building on other land. The Fish and Wildlife Service can’t require landowners to prepare such a plan, but owners are legally liable if their development is proved to harm or kill an endangered or threatened species.

That kind of plan is on the State Land Department’s agenda for lands it owns in Pinal County that are potential homes for not just the shovel-nosed snake but the desert tortoise, the gray hawk, the yellow-billed cuckoo, the Chiricahua

leopard frog, the Southwestern willow flycatcher and the pygmy owl, among other species.

It’s going to get grant money to survey for these species on three large parcels.

Besides Superstition Vistas, they include lands lying between Interstate 10 and Highway 79, and the San Pedro River corridor in southeast Pinal county.