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Obama administration cancels endangered species listing for lizard



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By: Audrey Hudson

The Obama administration will not list the dune sagebrush lizard as an endangered species having reached an agreement with oil and gas developers and other stakeholders to protect 650,000 acres of land as habitat for the creature in Texas and New Mexico.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar said the unprecedented agreement commits local governments and industry to help ensure the species' continued existence by reducing human impact on 88 percent of the lizard's range.

"This effort is nothing short of historic," Salazar told reporters during a conference call announcing the decision. "We can accomplish a lot when we set aside divisive rhetoric and focus on real solutions on the ground."

Dan Ashe, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, said the lizard's habitat was in decline primarily due to oil and gas development.

"We believe there is clear and compelling evidence those conservation agreements are going to be effective," Ashe said. "We have determined that the lizard is no longer in danger of extinction and

not likely to become endangered in the foreseeable future."

"Economic growth and species protection can coexist," Ashe said. "We know how much people depend on the land for their livelihood... that's why it was so important to find common ground here. I think this process has shown what we can accomplish when we set aside divisive rhetoric and focus on solutions."

Environmentalists accused the Obama administration of selling out to energy companies and criticized the decision.

“I think that’s unfortunate we will hear that comment from some groups,” Salazar said. “They may want to keep that conflict going for conflict’s sake. But it is a huge conservation victory. We would simply disagree with them.”

The unprecedented agreement commits the states and other stakeholders to decades of conservation efforts estimated to cost millions of dollars, thereby avoiding a certain shutdown of all oil and gas development near the lizard’s habitat and save thousands of jobs.

“While it was a long and emotional process, in the end, Washington listened,” said Rep. Steve Pearce (R-N.M.). “This is a huge victory for the people who have tirelessly fought to save regional jobs and our way of life.”

The Center for Biological Diversity said the federal government blatantly sidestepped the intentions of the Endangered Species Act, and that the lizard’s existence is vulnerable to an unenforceable, voluntary agreement.

“This decision by the Obama administration to toss aside the Endangered Species Act and bow to the wishes of the oil and gas industry is not only bad news for this rare lizard but sets a dangerous precedent for other declining species,” said Taylor McKinnon, center spokeswoman. “In denying the lizard protection, Secretary Salazar is sticking his head in the sand and ignoring science.”

Salazar said the Fish and Wildlife Service would closely monitor the lizard’s progress to make sure the extensive plans are implemented.

Ashe said that if industry and local governments fail to abide by the plan, they would follow through with the endangered species listing.

“That is ultimately the way we would enforce this,” Ashe said.