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Dunes sagebrush lizard will not be listed as endangered species

By Milan Simonich

SANTA FE - The dunes sagebrush lizard will not be listed as an endangered species.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided today against federal protection for the lizard, which exists in four counties of southeastern New Mexico and four others in West Texas.

U.S. Interior Secretary Ken Salazar has scheduled a news conference for later today, but the federal government's position is that voluntary conservation agreements to save the reptile are working well.

Through these measures, private landowners and businesses are setting aside land and money to protect the dunes sagebrush lizard's habitat, which overlaps with oil drilling in the Permian Basin.

The lizard needs wind-blown dunes with a shrub called shinnery oak to survive.

U.S. Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., was perhaps the fiercest opponent of listing the lizard as endangered. He hailed the Obama administration's ruling as a belated but correct decision.



"For over a year, New Mexicans have fought against the unnecessary listing of the lizard," Pearce said in a statement. "They have demanded that the lizard not be listed without accurate science or at the expense of jobs for hardworking people. Finally, Washington listened..."

Mark Salvo of WildEarth Guardians said the ruling was wrong.

"There is no species more deserving of federal protection than the dunes sagebrush lizard. Existing conservation measures, particularly in Texas, are so weak that I fear the species may become extirpated parts of its remaining range," Salvo said today.

His organization and other environmental groups said Pearce had engaged in the politics of fear by saying thousands of jobs in oil and gas drilling could be lost if the lizard were listed.

The Center for Biological Diversity did a study and concluded that the lizard inhabits about 1 percent of the public lands in New Mexico where oil and gas drilling could occur.

Unlike Pearce, New Mexico's two Democratic U.S. senators, Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, did not actively fight endangered species status for the lizard. But months ago, the senators joined with Pearce in saying the conservation agreements were working well.

"This is a great example of how voluntary cooperative agreements are being used to help protect a habitat and a species, while allowing oil and gas development to continue in southeastern New Mexico," Bingaman said. "I hope this process can serve as a model for the future."

State Rep. Dennis Kintigh, an ardent opponent of listing the lizard, predicted that the case would next go to court. Kintigh

said whichever side lost would sue the federal government.

In New Mexico, the lizard exists in parts of Chaves, Eddy, Lea and Roosevelt counties. In Texas, its range is in Andrews, Gaines, Ward and Winkler counties.

Historically, it was found in Crane County, Texas, and possibly Cochran and Edwards counties as well.

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