



Round Rock Leader

County preps for salamander showdown



BRAD STUTZMAN

Editor

July 20, 2012

Gary Boyd, Williamson County's director of environmental services, says county government will pursue the truth - wherever it leads - as to whether three local species of salamander are endangered and in need of federal protection.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has promised a decision by Sept. 30, with county officials still gathering research data in advance of an anticipated August public hearing.

"We're going to study this," Boyd said during a break in the July 17 Commissioners Court meeting. "We're going to study it scientifically. At the end of the day, they may need to be protected, but we're going to do it right."

At issue is the question of whether local or federal authorities can best protect the Jollyville Plateau, Georgetown and Salado salamanders. Also at issue - as commissioners pointedly noted - is whether they are endangered at all.

"Fish is the judge and jury in it," Pct. 2 Commissioners Cynthia Long of Cedar Park said, referring to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department. "But they are required by law to look at the best-available data."

With that in mind, the Williamson County Conservation Foundation - on which several county officials serve - is in the second year of a five-year study regarding local salamander populations.

Last month, District 31 U.S. Rep. John Carter - joined by local political, business and school district leaders - hosted a news conference near the intersection of RM 620 and state Highway 45, where some Jollyville Plateau salamanders live in a stream.

On Tuesday, Southwestern University biology professor Ben Pierce gave commissioners an update on his study of the Georgetown salamander.

"The Georgetown salamander is found only in Georgetown," Pierce said. "They typically move only a few feet. They're pretty sedentary."

Pierce said he and his students have been keeping tabs on salamander populations at two Georgetown locations: the county-owned, 170-acre Twin Springs Preserve and Swinbank Spring, located near Lake Georgetown and the San Gabriel River.

The group has been doing monthly visual surveys, classifying salamanders by size and tagging them (with dye injected under their skin) so the same salamander doesn't get counted twice, Pierce said. They have tagged 90 salamanders at Swinbank Spring and 63 at Twin Springs Preserve.

He said 73 percent of the tagged Swinbank Spring salamanders have been observed on more than one occasion.

Visible populations at the two sites, during any particular visit, have ranged from a low of two to a high of 106, he said.

Pierce calculated there are, based on his research, currently about 100 adult salamanders at Swinbank and 215 adult salamanders at Twin Springs.

"Just because you don't see them on the surface doesn't mean they're not there," he explained. "We suspect there's vertical movement, up and down the springs. They survive in these springs and caves, where it's wet and cool. They can't really survive in a terrestrial environment."

Pierce said the two Georgetown salamander populations he has studied are relatively small in number and good water quality is the condition most essential for their survival.

'Fish' moving forward

Meanwhile, Williamson County officials are at odds with Austin environmental groups calling for the salamanders to be federally protected.

The Save our Springs Alliance and the Center for Biological Diversity previously filed a lawsuit with Fish and Wildlife, calling for the salamanders to be counted on the endangered species list. SOS has been working since 2005 to preserve the salamanders, in ways similar to how the Barton Springs salamander was added to the endangered species list in 1997.

"The Jollyville Plateau salamander needs immediate protection under the Endangered Species Act to survive," Colette Adkins Giese, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said in a 2010 news release. "The Jollyville Plateau salamander is faced with imminent extinction."

Recently, Carter - joined by U.S. Sens. John Cornyn and Kay Bailey Hutchison - called on the Fish and Wildlife Service to delay a ruling until Williamson County can complete its five-year study.

In a June 29 letter to Carter, Fish and Wildlife said that's not possible because of a settlement the agency reached with the Austin environmental groups filing the lawsuit.

"We cannot grant an extension," the agency wrote Carter. "We understand that you are currently in the second year of a five-year research plan. Please be assured that if we publish a proposed listing rule, we will hold a public comment period and will be able to accept and incorporate research information from Williamson County and the Williamson County [Conservation] Foundation, to inform a final listing decision. We intend that any final action resulting from a proposed rule would be based on the best scientific and commercial data available and be as accurate as possible."

Local officials have said they fear an endangered species listing for the salamanders could delay or derail a number of local development projects, including the widening of Interstate 35 through Bell County and construction of public schools in Round Rock ISD.