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Are some rattlesnakes endangered? Feds to weigh in  
by BILL KACZOR, Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Federal officials are considering whether the eastern diamondback rattlesnake -- the target of "rattlesnake roundups" in Georgia and Alabama -- should be given endangered species protection.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Wednesday it would review the snake's status in response to a petition by three environmental groups and snake expert Bruce Means.

They say the reptile, the world's largest rattlesnake at up to eight feet in length, is being endangered by loss of habitat and human predation for their meat and skins across the Southeast. There are no bag limits in South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana.

"Eastern diamondbacks are rapidly disappearing all across the southeastern United States, and in some states, they've more or less vanished," said Collette Adkins Giese, a reptile and amphibian specialist at the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson, Ariz. "They need Endangered Species Act protection to survive."

The rattlers once ranged along the coastal lowlands of the Southeast from North Carolina to eastern Louisiana including all of Florida.

Means, president of the Coastal Plains Institute and Land Conservancy in Tallahassee, said the loss of longleaf pine habitat is threatening rattlesnakes as well as other species including the gopher tortoise, red-cockaded woodpecker and indigo snake.

No more than 3 percent of the Southeast's longleaf pine forests remain. In some cases, timber growers have replaced the longleaf with faster-growing species.

Other groups joining in the petition are two Georgia organizations: Protect All Living Species of Cairo, and One More Generation based Fayetteville.

The petitioners acknowledge the rate of the snakes' population decline is unknown but say an analysis of four rattlesnake roundups in the Southeast shows a steady decline in the weights of prize-winning rattlers and the numbers collected.

"That is about as far from the truth as anything I have seen," said city Planning Director Don Childre, who runs the annual Opp, Ala., roundup on the first weekend of every April. He labeled those advocating endangered species protection for the snakes as "eco-terrorists."

Childre, who has been involved with the event for about 40 years, said there are plenty of rattlesnakes around, noting a 3-footer recently was found in the city clerk's flower bed.

At one time 350 to 400 snakes were captured and killed for their meat every year, but it was sharply scaled back seven years ago when the Jaycees chapter that sponsored the roundup disbanded and the city took over.

This year only 27 snakes were taken by three or four hunters, Childre said. He said some of the snakes are released, and others are sold to skin and venom dealers or given to researchers.

Another roundup in Georgia this year changed its name to the Claxton Rattlesnake and Wildlife Festival. Instead of hunting, killing, buying and selling the reptiles, the March festival featured wildlife displays and presentations on protecting the snakes and other creatures.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is seeking comment from state and federal agencies as well as the public before deciding whether threatened or endangered listing is warranted. If not, no action will be taken.

If listing is warranted, the agency then will solicit independent scientific review as well as public comment, a year-long process, before making a final decision.

A third option is to find listing is warranted but precluded by higher priorities such as proposals to list species at greater risk. Action then would be put on hold.