

# Austin American-Statesman

## Feds issue salamander-protection ruling Jollyville salamander called 'threatened'

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On Monday, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service granted protection status to a pair of local salamander species. At the same time the federal agency set aside 4,451 acres, in Williamson and Travis counties, as "critical habitat" for them. How that will affect Williamson County – its people, water quality and prospects for future economic development – depends upon whom one asks.

Environmental activists see it as a plus, contending cleaner water for amphibians means cleaner water for people, too. But some local elected officials are less optimistic, challenging the entire premise that salamanders are endangered.

According to Fish and Wildlife documentation, the designations and setting aside become effective in 30 days – meaning Sept. 18.

The Austin blind salamander, found in the Travis County's Barton Springs area, has been listed as "endangered." The Jollyville Plateau salamander, found in northwest Williamson County, is deemed "threatened."

"Threatened is a lower level of protection," said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, an Arizona-based conservation group that's been lobbying for salamander protection. "A species is

threatened if it is in danger of becoming endangered. It is endangered if it is in danger of becoming extinct."

The Fish and Wildlife Service announced it will continue studying two other species under consideration – the Georgetown and Salado salamanders – for another six months.

### What's the science?

Monday's Fish and Wildlife announcement marked the latest development in an ongoing controversy, generally pitting environmental groups against local elected leaders and economic-development interests.

In January 2012, the Austin-based Save Our Springs Alliance and the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit with Fish and Wildlife, calling for the salamanders to be given endangered-species protection. SOS has been working since 2005 to preserve the Jollyville salamander, in ways similar to how the Barton Springs salamander was added to the endangered species list in 1997.

Although Fish and Wildlife has for years been considering the status of local salamanders, the agency's lawsuit settlement with the two environmental groups sped up the process.

In August 2012, Fish and Wildlife Services announced it wanted to set aside about 6,000 acres for salamander habitat in Williamson, Travis and Bell counties.

According to a Fish and Wildlife news release from that timeframe: “The service’s proposed listing determination is that the Austin blind, Jollyville Plateau, Georgetown and Salado salamanders are presently in danger of extinction throughout their entire ranges, based on the immediacy, severity and scope of the threats from habitat degradation.”

Meanwhile, local authorities – led by Williamson County government – contracted for their own studies.

In September 2012, about 300 people packed the Williamson Conference Center for a public hearing Fish and Wildlife sponsored.

Kemble White, an environmental scientist working with Williamson County, told Fish and Wildlife representatives in September, “Our data ... indicates that the salamander populations in Williamson County are steady ... and the water quality remains excellent. These species developed a resilience that is overlooked.”

But this week Giese – speaking in a telephone interview – disagreed.

“These salamanders are in trouble because they require clean water,” she said. “Unfortunately, the springs around Austin are becoming polluted because of runoff. Hopefully, we can protect the quality that is so important for drinking water and recreation.”

On Tuesday, U.S. Rep. John Carter challenged that, referencing a spring near the intersection of RM 620 and state Highway 45, where local leaders toured last June and salamanders were found to be “thriving.” If any area was going to be affected by runoff, it would be that spot, he said.

“I think [Fish and Wildlife] failed on the pollution issue,” Carter said, stating it’s drought – not pollution – that’s making salamanders harder to find these days.

“Salamanders live in springs,” he said. “When that spring dries up they basically burrow back up to the source of the spring.”

### **What’s the impact?**

Regarding the economic development aspect: In January, Fish and Wildlife put the cost of setting aside 6,475 acres for salamander habitat at \$29 million.

Williamson County puts that figure at close to \$500 million.

Carter – who also attended last September’s meeting – said he is “disappointed” with the “threatened” listing for the Jollyville Plateau salamander.

“The Jollyville [salamander] affects Williamson County,” Carter said. “The threatened [status] is going to be a limiting factor over there. I am sure there will be some appeals of that ruling. I’m sure the landowners are going to be involved.”

Giese said landowner worries would generally be unfounded.

“It is absolutely not true that a critical habitat designation would stop development. The only way critical habitat comes into play is if there is federal action,” she said, citing U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ projects by way of example.

**Local elected officials remain skeptical.**

Carter said the Endangered Species Act – adopted in 1973 – was meant to protect bison and bald eagles. The congressman said he’s less sure salamanders and insects ought to be covered.

Williamson County Pct. 3 Valerie Covey of Georgetown has in the past said the salamanders are already well-protected by local regulations and practices.

“I’m not quite sure at this point,” Covey said Tuesday, assessing the impact of Fish and Wildlife’s ruling. “Our guys are filtering through it.”