

# Austin American-Statesman

Jollyville, Austin salamanders considered under threat of extinction

## U.S. Fish and Wildlife releases ruling on species

By Mike Parker

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Two local species of salamanders are now listed in the Endangered Species Act under a final ruling released Tuesday by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In the long-awaited ruling, the service is listing the Austin salamander species as endangered and the Jollyville salamander as threatened, putting both under federal protection. In another ruling, the service is allowing an extra six-month comment period on listing the Georgetown and Salado salamander species as endangered.

The ruling pertains to small, aquatic creatures that live in springs throughout Williamson County and northwest Travis County. The species grow to be as long as two inches and never leave the water.

The listings stem from a petition filed in 2004 by the Center for Biological Diversity to list 225 species as endangered. The Austin-based Save Our Springs Alliance followed with a petition in 2005 to specifically list the Jollyville salamander as endangered.

Collette Adkins Giese, a lawyer representing CBD, said the listings are critical in saving the two salamander species that live nowhere else in the world.



Ralph Barrera

The Jollyville salamander lives in springs throughout northwestern Travis County and southwestern Williamson County. The creatures grow to be about 2 inches long and live their entire lives in the water.

“Endangered Species Act protection for the salamanders also protects the springs that give drinking water and recreation to Texas communities,” she said in a media release. “These Texas salamanders cannot survive in waterways polluted with pesticides, industrial chemicals and other toxins so they are excellent indicators of the health of the environment.”

County, state and federal politicians have fought the listings, saying local cities and the county have already implemented strong conservation measures. State Rep. Tony Dale (R-Cedar Park), who represents Cedar Park,

Leander and Northwest Austin, said it remains to be seen how the ruling will be regulated.

“That’s where it is cloudy, and already it’s having an impact on the economics of the area. Landowners, developers and builders don’t necessarily know what the rules are,” he said.

As a threatened species, the Jollyville salamander is considered by the service to be on the brink of extinction in the near future, and can allow for flexibility in regulating the species.

The service’s ruling lists 32 critical habitats totaling 4,331 acres for the Jollyville salamander. Of that acreage, 675 acres are within Williamson County while 3,656 acres are in northwestern Travis County. One 120-acre critical habitat is set aside for the Austin salamander.

Lesli Gray, a spokesperson for the service, said the critical habitats are set aside for the salamanders, but do not create any additional requirements for private landowners. The habitats only apply to any construction that uses federal funding or necessitates a federal permit.

“It identifies an area on a map of where (the species) could be, but it doesn’t require them to do anything additional,” she said. “It doesn’t set aside a preserve, a reserve or any kind of conservation area.”

According to the ruling, the service based the listings on three criteria:

- The present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range.
- The inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms.
- Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

The Williamson County Conservation Foundation, which is funded through county development permits, began its own five-year study into the salamander species. County commissioners requested the service withhold a ruling, saying data from their study did not corroborate studies cited by the service.

The service commented on the study in its ruling: “Although there may be some disagreement among scientists knowledgeable about the Austin blind and Jollyville Plateau salamanders, the disagreement is not substantial enough to extend the final determination for these species,” it reads.

The service first proposed the listings in August 2012, which followed with a six-month comment period. Two public hearings in Round Rock and Austin drew hundreds of comments from residents, many of whom opposed the listings. The 222-page ruling directly responds to 85 of those comments.

For a comment on how the listings will have negative effects on private development and infrastructure, the ruling states the service does not make decisions based on that data. But it states that the secretary can make revisions to critical habitats after taking those effects under consideration.

U.S. Rep. John Carter (R-Round Rock), who attended the public hearing in Round Rock, said the Endangered Species Act served a good purpose when it protected bison and bald eagles, but now he is not so sure.

“I’m not sure the people who wrote the Endangered Species Act [in 1973] ever thought we’d be down to where we are now,” he said.