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Feds list Georgetown and Salado salamanders as threatened



BRET GERBE

The Georgetown Salamander is found only in certain springs in Williamson County.

BY CLAIRE OSBORN
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ROUND ROCK — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Friday that it will add the Georgetown and Salado salamanders, a pair of tiny amphibians found in only a handful of local springs, to the list of threatened species.

Predictably, the move brought cheers from environmentalists and objections from Georgetown and Williamson County officials who fought the measure, which they believed would cause the area to lose millions of dollars in development.

But the impact of the ruling might not be clear for 60 more days, after the federal agency decides what hurdles to impose on developers.

“I’m very disappointed that the service decided to list (the salamanders) as threatened, although this is better than an endangered listing,” said Williamson County Commissioner Valerie Covey, who has spearheaded efforts to oppose the listing. “We have a lot of questions and issues about how it really could work.”

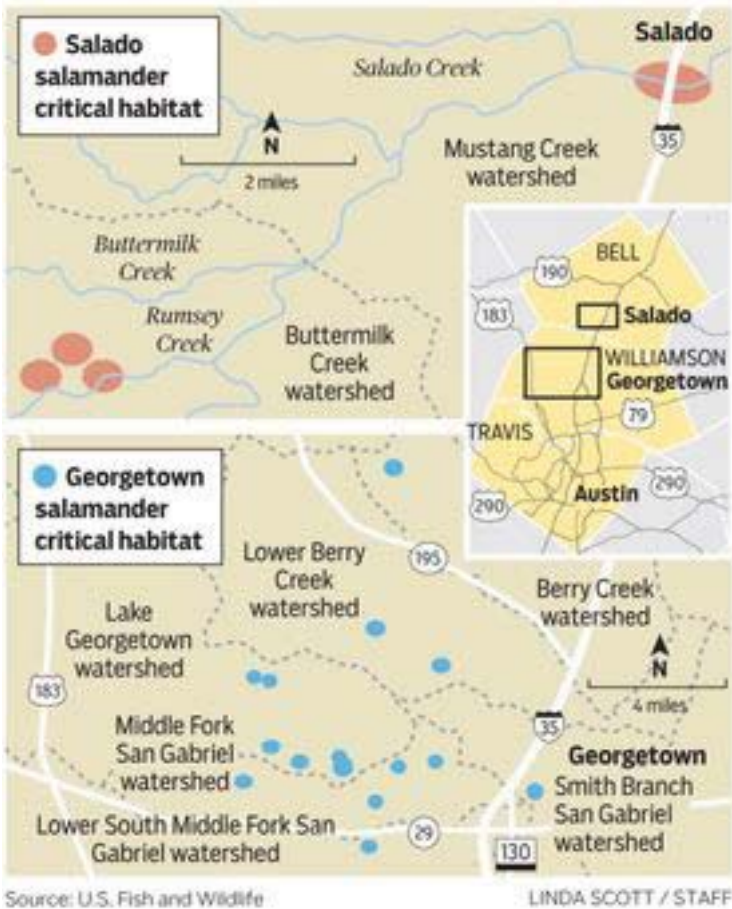
Typically, a developer whose project might harm a threatened species must seek a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. As part of that process, the developer might have to limit the timing or scope of construction, or take other steps to help the species bounce back.

In the case of the Georgetown salamander, however, the wildlife service is considering a special rule that would allow development to proceed, as long as developers comply with Georgetown’s salamander protection ordinance.

The city passed that measure in December, hoping to fend off a federal listing of the Georgetown salamander by showing that local protections were in place. The ordinance prohibits new development within 80 meters (about 262 feet) of a salamander site and within 50 meters (about 164 feet) around a spring. Within a secondary buffer zone, up to 300 meters upstream of those areas, limited construction of wastewater lines, parks and houses would be allowed.

Salamander sites in Central Texas

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced Friday that it will list the Georgetown and Salado salamanders as threatened species. The agency has previously identified the areas below as critical habitat for these amphibians; it will hold another 60-day comment period before making a final determination on those habitat areas.



LINDA SCOTT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has previously identified these areas as critical habitat for salamanders.

On Monday, the wildlife service will open a 60-day public comment period on whether to use the Georgetown ordinance. If the federal agency decides the Georgetown ordinance is enough, developers who comply with the city's buffers could build their projects without seeking a federal permit, even if their project might affect the salamanders.

The Georgetown ordinance wouldn't apply to the Salado salamander's habitats, which are found in Bell County.

People can also comment during the 60-day period on the location of the critical habitats identified by the agency.

"While this ruling is not what I was hoping for and wanted, it gives us hope that we can continue to develop these areas in a way that would be acceptable to most who would be involved," Georgetown City Council Member Tommy Gonzalez said.

Bell County Commissioner Tim Brown had a different reaction Friday. "This is as huge win for us (Bell County Coalition)," he said. "We emphasized the protections that are already in place through Clearwater UWCD's (underground water conservation district) rules and regulations, and we convinced them that there are no imminent threats beyond the immediate environs of the springs."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife's decision Friday was spurred by a settlement with the Center for Biological Diversity in 2011 to expedite federal protection decisions for 757 species across the country, said Collette Adkins Giese, an attorney for the center based in Arizona.

"I'm glad these salamanders are finally protected, but disappointed the Fish and Wildlife Service is backtracking on the level of protection," Adkins Giese said.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife proposed in 2012 to list the Georgetown and Salado salamanders as endangered rather than threatened, which would have meant greater restrictions on development. Last August, the agency listed the Austin blind salamander as endangered and the Jollyville Plateau salamander as threatened.

Biologists have found the Georgetown salamander in two caves in Williamson County and in 15 springs along five tributaries to the San Gabriel River. All of the sites for the Georgetown salamander are within the city of Georgetown or its extraterritorial jurisdiction, Covey said.

The Salado salamander has been found in four spring sites near the village of Salado and three springs farther upstream on Salado Creek in Bell County.

Experts say the salamanders serve as a key indicator of how healthy a waterway is because they absorb the water — and any toxins in it — directly through their fragile skins. A declining salamander population can be an early sign of deteriorating water quality that could affect many other species.

Georgetown salamanders

Typically 2 inches long, Georgetown salamanders have grayish bodies with translucent bellies, broad heads, prominent red gills and large eyes with a gold iris. They spend their entire lives underwater. Biologists have found the Georgetown salamander in 15 springs along five tributaries to the San Gabriel River (South, Middle, and North Forks; Cowan Creek and Berry Creek) and in two caves in Williamson County.

Salado salamanders

These aquatic dwellers are usually 2 inches long, with reduced eyes, reddish-brown gills, grayish-brown bodies and translucent bellies. The Salado salamander has been identified in four spring sites near the village of Salado and three springs farther upstream on Salado Creek in Bell County.

Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service