



ENDANGERED SPECIES: Feds finalize protections for 2 garter snakes

Jessica Estepa,
E&E reporter
Monday, July 7, 2014

The Fish and Wildlife Service this week will finalize protections for two garter snake species found in the southwestern United States.

A final rule scheduled to be published in tomorrow's Federal Register will list as threatened the northern Mexican garter snake (*Thamnophis eques megalops*) and the narrow-headed garter (*T. rufipunctatus*). The snakes are native to Arizona and New Mexico.

Predation and competition from non-native species, such as bass, certain catfish and bullfrogs, are the biggest threats to the snakes, FWS said. Additionally, wildfires and land uses that affect aquatic habitat threaten the reptiles.

In particular, the northern Mexican garter snake is among a number of species that could be affected by a proposed open-pit copper mine in Arizona. In May, FWS withdrew its support for the Rosemont Mine, saying agencies needed to review water supply issues that could affect protected species. It cited the snake as potentially falling under the proposed mine's footprint (Greenwire, May 23).

The final rule details how existing developments in the area, as well as Rosemont, affect groundwater supplies, and thus both snake species.

"The best available scientific and commercial information indicates that any reduction in the presence or availability of water is a significant threat to northern Mexican and narrow-headed gartersnakes, their prey base, and their habitat," the rule said. "This is because water is a fundamental need that supports the necessary aquatic and riparian habitats and prey species needed by both species of gartersnake."

The agency said it intends to finalize the critical habitat for the snakes in a future rulemaking.

The northern Mexican garter snake, found in Arizona and New Mexico, can grow up to 44 inches in length. Its color ranges from olive to olive-brown and olive-gray, and it can be found in wetlands, large river woodlands and streamside forests.

The narrow-headed garter snake is found in Arizona and New Mexico. It also can grow up to 44 inches in length and has an elongated head. Its lack of stripes distinguishes it from other garter snake species. Its base color is tan or gray-brown, and it can be found in clear, rocky streams.