



Local lizard may get federal protection

By Blake Herzog,
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The flat-tailed horned lizard, a less than 1-ounce reptile whose color matches the sand dunes of southern Imperial County where offroad recreation has become popular, became a candidate for protection under the California Endangered Species Act last week.

The decision by the state Fish and Game Commission means the lizard now has the same protections as any other endangered species, and the commission must decide within a year whether to grant it permanent status, based on further research by its staff.

The staff based its recommendation last December that the lizard become a candidate based on its research and the petition filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, which has fought for years to get the species listed by the federal government. It is not listed as either endangered or threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

The lizard is also found in western Yuma County and the northern Mexican states of Sonora and Baja California, where the majority of its range lies.



Lizard closeup

Yuma Sun file photo

The flat-tailed horned lizard is seen in this file photo. The lizard species became a candidate for protection under the California Endangered Species Act last week.

Anyone who knowingly kills or harms a lizard in California is subject to sanctions under state law, but those can be difficult to enforce. "Clearly they would have to be caught in the act of killing them," said Ilene Anderson, public lands desert director for the center. Permits can be obtained by farmers or others who might cause harm to the animals in the course of their regular business, she added.

"From our perspective the most important thing is now the state is going to have to be consulted on for any development that happens within the flat-tailed horned lizard habitat," she said.

There is dispute over whether the species is in fact declining, and how many live in the dunes. A biologist with the Bureau of Land Management, Larry LePre, told the Yuma Sun in December the dunes aren't prime habitat since they don't have many of the harvester ants which are the basis of the lizards' diet, and there's no reliable data to suggest they're going up or down in numbers, mostly because they're difficult to detect.

The BLM, which maintains the Imperial Sand Dunes Recreation Area, is part of a joint Rangewide Management Strategy for the species covering almost 500 acres in California and Arizona. The center's petition contends this is inadequate since most of the land is open to off-road vehicle use.

Anderson maintains updated studies need to be done to determine what is going on with the species, and those which have been done have shown "nothing but declines." One small population remains in the Coachella Valley, in the northern reaches of the habitat.

She said the center considers the reptile an important indicator of how well the rest of the desert ecosystem is doing. "There's something going on here if a lizard species can't even survive, so I think they're a bellwether species for the southern deserts," she said.

The Imperial dunes are about 20 miles west of Yuma, and are said to attract more than 1 million visitors a year. A 2007 study cited by the BLM estimated visitors to the recreational area spent \$41.3 million to \$73.8 million in the city during the 2006 season.

Veronica Frandsen, who owns Just Ride ATV rentals in Yuma with her husband, said she's not particularly worried about the lizard's potential designation by California having a negative effect on their business. "There are so many beautiful places around Yuma can offroad around every day, and there's so much more to Yuma than just the sand dunes, although people come from all over the world to see them."

She said environmentalists are fighting to close areas to off-road recreation based on mistaken assumptions about who they are, based on a minority who don't care about what happens to the landscape. "People that offroad do it because we have the same love of the beauty of nature, beauty of the desert and its wildlife. But they say we're just going to come in and destroy everything," she said.

As Frandsen noted, this lizard species has been an issue on both sides of the Colorado River for decades. The Center for Biological Diversity and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have fought for two decades over whether it should be listed as endangered, ending up in court several times.

Concerns over the lizard species status prompted the Arizona Department of Transportation to put up 18 miles of special fencing along State Route 195 as it was being built.