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Flat-tailed horned lizard wins 1-year reprieve from urban encroachment



The rare flat-tailed horned lizard has won a one-year reprieve from urban encroachment. (Cameron Barrows)

Louis Sahagun - February 12, 2015

A squat lizard with dragon-like head spines won a temporary reprieve from encroachment by urban development and alternative energy facilities on Thursday when California's Fish and Game Commission declared it a candidate for protection under the state Endangered Species Act.

With the flat-tailed horned lizard declared a candidate species, it is against the law to kill,

harm or capture one without state authorization, pending completion of a one-year study to determine whether permanent protection is warranted.

"One year of protection is a good first step," said Ileene Anderson, a scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity, which petitioned the commission to list the species after federal wildlife authorities denied special protections for the lizard, one of the rarest and most legally contested reptiles in the United States.

The lizard -- 3 1/2 inches long and a voracious consumer of harvester ants -- has been the focus of court battles since it was first proposed for listing in 1993 as a federally endangered species in its historic haunts in Arizona, California and Baja California, Mexico.

Significant habitat loss began in the late 1930s and the '40s and '50s as a result of an agriculture boom. Later, habitat was fragmented and destroyed by roads, off-road vehicles, light industry, urban development and renewable energy facilities.

The lizard's primary prey, harvester ants, have also been hard hit by pesticides and competition with invasive Argentine ants.

Today, remnant populations of flat-tailed horned lizards cling to existence within Southern California's Coachella Valley National Wildlife Refuge, the eastern and western edges of Imperial County, and near the city of Yuma in the southwestern corner of Arizona.

"We've come to a critical point in the evolutionary history of this lizard," Anderson said. "It needs full protection now to save it from extinction."