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Threatened listing for snake found only in Louisiana, Texas

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A burrowing snake found only in Louisiana and Texas is now listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act.

The Louisiana pine snake is a 5-foot-long (1.5-meter-long) constrictor found in a few longleaf pine forests in Louisiana and Texas. It eats Baird's pocket gophers and lives in their burrows.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced its listing Thursday, opening a 30-day comment period on a proposal for protecting the snake by limiting some work in the forests while allowing work that would create or maintain good habitat.

The snake had been on the agency's list of "candidate species" for protection for 34 years, and the International Union for Conservation of Nature has listed it as endangered since 2007.

"This has been a long time, so we're very excited to see them finally get listed," said Elsie Bennett, reptile and amphibian staff attorney for an endangered species nonprofit called the Center for Biological Diversity .

The group said pine snakes once lived in nine Louisiana parishes and 14 Texas counties. However, their populations have dwindled along with their habitat, as urbanization, agriculture and logging expanded and people suppressed the periodic natural fires required by longleaf pine forests.

"To save the pine snake, we've got to protect this rare longleaf pine habitat," Bennett said.

The federal agency said that under its habitat proposal, timber companies and other private owners of land inhabited by the snakes can thin, harvest and plant trees in a way that maintains open-canopied pine forests, because those are good habitat for the gophers and snakes. They would need to consult with the service before stumping, disking or doing other below-ground work that might disturb the animals, according to a news release.

There are six known natural populations of the snakes, and two in Louisiana are stable, said Joseph Ranson, field supervisor at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Lafayette. Biologists also have been releasing captive-bred pine snakes into the Kisatchie Forest in central Louisiana to create a seventh population, he said.

However, U.S. Forest Service research ecologist D. Craig Rudolph of Nacogdoches, Texas, wrote in 2016, after the threatened status was proposed, that it had been years since scientists had found any Louisiana pine snakes in four of the seven areas where they lived in 2008, “despite intensive search.”

He also wrote that although snakes reintroduced to the Kisatchie Forest have survived, though there was no proof they’d reproduced.

“Characterization of the reintroduced snakes in Grant Parish as a population is too optimistic,” he wrote in a peer review requested by the Fish and Wildlife Service and filed electronically.

Bennett said she hopes the service quickly designates critical habitat for the snakes.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued to make the Interior Department agency decide the snake’s status and that of hundreds of other species on the agency’s list of candidates for protection.

Under a settlement in 2011, the agency set deadlines for decisions on more than 250 candidate species and hundreds of others for which legal petitions had asked protection. The Center for Biological Diversity and WildEarth Guardians agreed to limit their legal actions against the government.

The Louisiana pine snake is the 194th species protected under the agreement, the group said.