

Groups Sue to Protect Rare Lizard in West Texas Oil Basin

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(CN) – In the heart of the nation’s largest and most active oilfield, a tiny lizard remains at the center of a debate about balancing environmental safeguards with the economic lifeblood of Texas.

Environmental groups filed a lawsuit Tuesday in Washington, D.C., federal court, seeking to force movement on federal protection for the dunes sagebrush lizard.

Advocates have long pushed for an Endangered Species Act listing for the lizard, a rare species found only in the sandy desert terrain of West Texas and southeastern New Mexico. There is little debate that the region’s booming oil and gas activity has contributed to a loss of the lizard’s habitat, but there has been fierce debate about whether getting the feds involved is the appropriate response.

“We feel pretty confident that the best science supports listing this species at least as threatened, and most likely as endangered,” Jason Rylander, an attorney for Defenders of Wildlife, said in an interview. “What I see right now is predatory political delay that is holding up a decision.”



Dunes sagebrush lizard. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.)

Last year, Rylander’s organization and the Center for Biological Diversity asked the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to formally list the lizard as threatened or endangered, a move that would open the door to land-use restrictions in parts of the oil-rich Permian Basin.

The government is generally required to respond to such petitions within 90 days with an initial finding on whether the listing may be warranted.

A more definitive answer is supposed to come within a year.

In the lawsuit filed Tuesday, Defenders of Wildlife and the Center for Biological Diversity say Fish and Wildlife has failed to meet either deadline.

The agency referred questions to the Department of Justice, which did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The energy industry has consistently pushed back on the idea of a federal listing, saying it would represent an economic blow to Texas and could shut down significant amounts of oil and gas production in the region. In years past, the industry succeeded in convincing Texas to adopt its own state-level plan to protect the lizard, an effort aimed at avoiding a federal listing.

“More lawsuits are not needed,” Todd Staples, head of the trade group Texas Oil and Gas Association, said in response to Tuesday’s filing. “Industry has and continues to deploy significant resources to benefit the species.”

Texas abandoned its previous conservation plan for the lizard last year, in part because it did not account for the impact of a huge increase in mining operations in West Texas that gather sand used for fracking. The state’s new plan, released earlier this year, would cover sand mining, but it has yet to be approved by Fish and Wildlife.

Still, advocates remain wary of the state’s approach.

“We have no reason to believe there actually has been conservation benefits [from the state plan],” said Michael Robinson with the Center for Biological Diversity. “The energy industries have gotten their way, and the lizard, its numbers keep shrinking.”