

Questions & Answers



Withdrawal of Proposed Rule to Reclassify Arroyo Toad from Endangered to Threatened under the Endangered Species Act

Q. *What is an Arroyo toad?*

A. The arroyo toad is a small, stocky, warty toad that is found in low gradient, medium-to-large streams and rivers with intermittent and perennial flow in coastal and desert drainages in central and southern California, and Baja California, Mexico. Arroyo toads occupy aquatic, riparian, and upland habitats in the remaining suitable drainages within its range. Arroyo toads are known to occur within 25 river basins in the United States and 10 river basins in Baja California, Mexico.

Q. *Where do Arroyo toads live?*

A. Arroyo toads require specialized habitats to breed, feed and develop. In order to reproduce, arroyo toads require rivers and streams with slow-moving currents, shallow pools and nearby sandbars where they can breed and lay eggs, and where tadpoles can develop. Outside of the breeding season arroyo toads are essentially terrestrial. They use riparian habitats for foraging and burrowing, including sandbars, alluvial terraces, and streamside areas with low vegetative cover composed predominantly of sycamores, live oaks, mulefat, cottonwoods and willow. Arroyo toad densities can range from fewer than 25 to over 200 adults over different stretches of the same stream.

Q. *What caused their population to decline?*

The arroyo toad was once relatively abundant in coastal central and southern California. In 1994, the Service designated the arroyo toad as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) due to a combination of both man-made and natural threats impacting the species' survival. Urban development, agricultural conversion, mining and prospecting activities, operation of dams and changes in water flow, alteration of the natural fire regime, and road development and maintenance have all contributed to the species' decline. The invasion of non-native predator species, like the bullfrog, and limited water resources, also contributed to the species' decline. Additionally, the threats of urbanization, dams and water diversions, introduced predators, and drought, all have current and ongoing impacts to the arroyo toad and its habitat.

Currently, arroyo toads still exist within the range they occupied historically and at the time of listing, but the species' numbers continue to decline, as well as the area it occupies within its current range.

Q. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is withdrawing a proposed rule to reclassify the arroyo toad as threatened under the Endangered Species Act. The best available scientific data suggests that the arroyo toad remains at risk of extinction and should remain classified as endangered. Through the scientific, peer-review process, new information on arroyo toad populations indicates that the species' population has not stabilized, and is declining in some areas.

Q. How did the Service come to that conclusion?

On March 27, 2014, the Service published a proposed rule to reclassify the arroyo toad based on recommendations from the Service's 5-Year Species Review, which outlined the best available information on the species' status at the time of the review. Since the Service published the proposed rule to reclassify the arroyo toad in March 2014, the agency received additional information through the peer review and public comment process that refutes our initial finding that the threats have decreased and that the recovery criteria for reclassifying the species have been met.

Arroyo toads are still persisting within the range they occupied historically and at the time of listing, and while this data does indicate that reproduction and recruitment is occurring, this data cannot be used to infer that arroyo toad populations are self-sustaining in the long-term.

No long-term population trend data are available for the arroyo toad that demonstrate that populations have stabilized or are increasing anywhere within its range, and new data indicate that the species has continued to decline in numbers and in area occupied within its current range. With this new information, the Service has determined that the best available scientific data do not currently support a determination that the species has responded to conservation actions to decrease threats such that a downlisting is warranted.

Q. What does "federally endangered" mean?

A. The term "endangered species" under the Endangered Species Act indicates the species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Under the Act, no party may "take" a listed species without prior consultation and authorization from the Service. Take is defined broadly in the Act as meaning "to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct."

Q. When is a species reclassified?

A. Under the Endangered Species Act, a listed species may be reclassified if the best available scientific and commercial data indicates a change in the species classification as a threatened species or endangered species. Reclassifying a species as an endangered species or threatened species can only be completed by following a formal rule-making process, to ensure the public, conservation community and stakeholders are provided a public comment period and to ensure the information available is peer-reviewed.

Q. What conservation and management actions have been implemented to support arroyo toad recovery?

Through Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act, the Service has worked with project developers and other federal agencies to decrease or mitigate impacts of urban development and road construction in arroyo toad habitat. Water releases from some dams have also been altered to more closely mimic the natural flows that support arroyo toads.

Because the majority of locations where arroyo toads are known to live are lands owned and managed by the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Defense, conservation efforts on federal lands is an important component to arroyo toad recovery efforts. U.S. Forest Service management efforts have been successful in reducing some impacts to the species, including cattle exclusion, road and off-highway vehicle trail closures or relocations, campground closures, road crossing improvements and monitoring, and project changes for avoidance of breeding habitat or season.

Similarly, the Department of Defense has contributed to conservation efforts for the arroyo toad where they occur on military lands through implementation of their Integrated Natural Resource Management Plans.

Additionally, Habitat Conservation Plans in southern California have placed portions of three additional river basins that support arroyo toads in reserves providing permanent protection for the species from development in those areas.

Q. What happens next?

A. The Service will continue to work alongside federal, state, local and non-profit partners to support monitoring and surveying work for the arroyo toad and conservation and management efforts for the species.