

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## DESERT TORTOISE PROPOSED AS ENDANGERED IN PART OF UTAH; STATUS OF THE SPECIES ELSEWHERE TO BE REVIEWED

A Utah population of the desert tortoise has been proposed for the endangered species list, and the status of other desert tortoise populations is being reviewed to see if the species should be proposed for listing as endangered or threatened in other portions of its range, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The desert tortoise lives in desert areas of California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona and adjacent areas of Mexico as far south as southern Sonora. Individuals may grow to more than a foot in length and have been known to live more than 50 years.

"Endangered" means that a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. "Threatened," a less dire status, means that a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future throughout all or a portion of its range.

A provision of the Endangered Species Act of 1973 allows citizens to petition the Interior Department to list species as endangered or threatened or to delete or reclassify species already listed.

Recently the Desert Tortoise Council formally petitioned the Department of the Interior to list as endangered and to identify critical habitat for a population of desert tortoises living on Beaver Dam Slope. This area is

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at the foot of the Beaver Dam Mountains in southwestern Utah and is under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Land Management, also an Interior agency.

The Department found that the Desert Tortoise Council has presented substantial evidence in support of its petition. After reviewing additional information obtained from scientific literature, the Bureau of Land Management, and from Fish and Wildlife Service personnel who visited the site, the Department decided to propose the Beaver Dam Slope population as endangered and to propose a portion of its range for designation as critical habitat.

Fewer than 350 tortoises are estimated to remain on the Beaver Dam Slope, which may have once supported as many as 2,000. The population is estimated to be declining at the rate of 5.5 percent a year, and most of the tortoises are adults, many of which are quite old. Reasons for the decline have not been determined although competition with grazing animals, poaching or collecting tortoises for pets, and predatory animals that eat tortoise eggs and young are all believed to be contributing factors.

The area that has been proposed as critical habitat would include roughly a 35-square-mile area in Washington County, Utah, bordered by the Beaver Dam Wash on the west, the Beaver Dam Mountains on the east, and by various geological formations on the north and south.

Designating the area as critical habitat would not, as many people believe, automatically close it to most human uses. The critical habitat designation applies only to the actions of Federal agencies and is essentially an official notification to these agencies that they must consult with the Interior Department about any action that would be likely to adversely affect the critical habitat.

Few populations of desert tortoises have been extensively studied; however, the information available on the Beaver Dam Slope population and surveys on other populations by the Bureau of Land Management, the California Department of Fish and Game, and others suggest that the tortoise may be declining in a significant portion of its range. Although all the States in which desert tortoises live have made substantial efforts to protect them, the Fish and Wildlife Service believes that a comprehensive review of the status of the species is needed. The Service is also seeking information about areas that may be critical habitat should the status review show that a proposal for listing is warranted.

The notice of the status review of desert tortoises and the proposal to list the Beaver Dam Slope population as endangered were published in the August 23, 1978, Federal Register. Interested parties are invited to submit factual information, comments, and suggestions on these two actions to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240. All comments should be received by November 21, 1978.