



Questions and Answers: Northern Mexican Gartersnake 12-month Finding

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office

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Q: What is the northern Mexican gartersnake?

A: The northern Mexican gartersnake (*Thamnophis eques megalops*) is a subspecies within of the Colubridae family of snakes and can grow to 44 inches, is olive to olive-brown to olive-gray and has three stripes that run the length of the body with a yellow stripe down the back that darkens toward the tail. A light-colored crescent extends behind the corners of its mouth. Northern Mexican gartersnakes physically resemble other native striped gartersnake species and training may be required to accurately identify the species. They feed mainly in water on native fish and frogs and supplement their diet with organisms such as earthworms, lizards and small rodents. Females give live birth to their young.

Q: Where is the northern Mexican gartersnake found?

A: Northern Mexican gartersnakes live in dense vegetation along the banks or in the shallows of wetlands (cienegas and stock tanks) and streamside (riparian) woodlands.

Historically, the snake occurred in perennial rivers, intermittent streams, and isolated wetlands throughout the southern half of Arizona, extreme western New Mexico and is associated with the Sierra Madre Occidental and Mexican Plateau in Mexico. In the United States, northern Mexican gartersnakes occurred at elevations ranging from 130 to 6,150 feet. In Mexico, they have been found at elevations as high as 8,497 feet.

The current distribution of the northern Mexican gartersnake within the United States is believed to be constrained to the middle/upper Verde River drainage, middle/lower Tonto Creek, the San Rafael Valley, as well as in a small number of isolated wetland habitats and stream reaches in southeastern Arizona. Within the United States, the northern Mexican gartersnake has been reduced to possibly less than 10 percent of its former distribution. The subspecies' current distribution in Mexico is less certain although the species is listed as Threatened by the Mexican government. The last observation of this species in New Mexico was in 2002 of a single individual.

Q: What is a 12-month finding?

A: Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), citizens or groups can petition the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service to consider adding a species to the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Species. The ESA requires that the petition must contain substantial scientific and commercial information that listing may be warranted in order to go forward with further investigation of the species' status. The Service must then make a finding within 12 months of the date of receipt of the petition on whether the petitioned action is (a) not warranted, (b) warranted, or (c) warranted but that the immediate proposal of a regulation implementing the petitioned action is precluded by other pending listing proposals.

Q: What is the Service's 12-month finding for the northern Mexican gartersnake?

A: The Service has published a 12-month finding that determined listing the northern Mexican gartersnake is warranted throughout its range but precluded by other higher priority listing actions.

Q: What prompted the Service to make this finding at this time?

A: On January 4, 2006, we published a 90-day finding that the December 15, 2003, petition from the Center for Biological Diversity presented substantial scientific information indicating that listing of the northern Mexican gartersnake may be warranted (71 FR 315). On September 26, 2006, we subsequently published a 12-month finding that listing of the northern Mexican gartersnake was “not warranted,” citing a lack of information on the species’ status and threats in Mexico (71 FR 56227).

Since 2006, new information on threats to this species in Mexico has been identified. Of particular importance, Mexican scientists have documented the expansion of the exotic American bullfrog in Mexico, a particularly serious threat to the gartersnake and its prey base. Based upon an updated review of the literature, further declines in the status of the species rangewide since 2006, and information about new significant threats to the species, we find that listing of the northern Mexican gartersnake throughout its range is warranted, however this action is precluded by other higher priority listing actions. This finding results in the addition of the northern Mexican gartersnake to our list of candidate species and a proposed rule will be prepared when funding becomes available.

Q: What does the “warranted but precluded” finding mean?

A: The ESA instructs the Service to make expeditious progress to add or remove qualified species from the List of Endangered and Threatened Species. The Service’s “warranted but precluded” finding indicates that federal protection will be sought for this species when funding becomes available to prepare a proposed rule. In the interim, the species will be assigned candidate status. Existing local or State protections are unaffected by this determination.

Q: What are the threats to the northern Mexican gartersnake?

A: The range-wide decline of northern Mexican gartersnakes appears to coincide with the expanding range of introduced nonnative species such as bullfrogs, crayfish, and nonnative fish that directly prey upon and compete with the northern Mexican gartersnake and its prey base. Human activities that result in the reduction, elimination or degradation of surface water or vegetation are also significant threats, but particularly where they co-occur in the presence of nonnative species.

Q: Are there efforts underway to conserve the northern Mexican gartersnake?

A: Agency personnel and private entities continue to partner together in efforts to control nonnative bullfrogs, nonnative fish, and crayfish in some areas currently or historically occupied by the northern Mexican gartersnake. The State of Arizona prohibits the transport of live crayfish (except of Yuma County) to deter the spread of this nonnative competitor, has prohibited live possession of bullfrogs, and established current bag limits for bullfrogs as unlimited-dead. Continued interest and focus on the northern Mexican gartersnake and its threats will aid in its conservation. At the species level, the Mexican gartersnake is listed by the Mexican government as threatened throughout Mexico.

Q: How can you participate in conservation of the northern Mexican gartersnake?

A: Individual and groups can initiate or participate in on-going projects to 1) control the spread of nonnative species; and 2) promote the establishment and recovery of native prey species within the range of the northern Mexican gartersnake. Land owners or managers with wetlands (ciénegas and stock tanks) and streamside (riparian) woodlands on their property can conserve or improve habitat on their land to benefit the snake. The Service’s Partners in Fish and Wildlife Program can provide technical and financial assistance. Information regarding the northern Mexican gartersnake,

its habitat, conservation efforts and threats should be submitted to the Field Supervisor, Arizona Ecological Services Office, 2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona 85021-4951.