



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 member 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. (It requires a certain degree of professional expertise to distinguish the northern Mexican gartersnake from other gartersnake 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.

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, and the Cienega Creek drainage as well as in a small number of isolated wetland habitats in southeastern Arizona. The subspecies' current distribution in Mexico is less certain although the species is listed as Threatened by the Mexican federal government. The northern Mexican gartersnake is considered likely extirpated from New Mexico.

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 not warranted throughout its range due to the need for more information on the status of and threats to the snake in Mexico.

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

A: The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned the Service to list the northern Mexican gartersnake on December 19, 2003. Funding constraints prevented immediate Service review of the petition. On May 17, 2005, the Center filed a complaint seeking injunctive relief. In a stipulated settlement agreement, the Service agreed to submit a 90-day finding to the *Federal Register* by December 16, 2005, and a 12-month finding by September 15, 2006.

The petitioners provided three listing scenarios for consideration by the Service: (1) Listing the United States population as a Distinct Population Segment (DPS); (2) listing *Thamnophis eques megalops* throughout its range in the United States and Mexico based on its rangewide status; or (3) listing *Thamnophis eques megalops* throughout its range in the United States and Mexico based on its status in the United States. After thorough analysis and review of all available scientific and commercial information, the Service finds that listing of the subspecies, under any of the three scenarios, is not warranted. Of the three listing scenarios specified above, the Service found scenario two provided the most rigorous evaluation of the status of the northern Mexican gartersnake and herein provide detailed discussion of the Service's conclusions in that context. The Service also provide additional discussion of the Service's evaluation of scenarios (1) listing the United States population as a DPS and (3) listing *Thamnophis eques megalops* throughout its range in the United States and Mexico based on its status in the United States.

Q: What does the “not warranted” finding mean for the northern Mexican gartersnake?

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 “not warranted” finding indicates that no Federal protection will be sought for this species. Existing local or State protections are unaffected by this determination. More information is needed on its status in Mexico before the northern Mexican gartersnake can again be considered for candidate status.

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. Habitat loss resulting from improper livestock grazing, development, urbanization, water diversions and groundwater pumping, is also a significant threat.

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

A: Voluntary efforts to control nonnative bullfrogs and crayfish are conducted in some areas occupied by the northern Mexican gartersnake. The State of Arizona prohibits the transport of live crayfish to deter the spread of this nonnative competitor and has prohibited live possession of the nonnative bullfrog and established the current bag limits for lethal take of bullfrogs as unlimited. Continued interest and focus on the species and its habitat will aid in its conservation. At the species level, the Mexican gartersnake is listed as threatened throughout Mexico by the government.

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

A: The public 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. Owners of land that support wetlands (ciénegas and stock tanks) and streamside (riparian) woodlands can conserve or improve habitat on their land to benefit the snake. The Service's Partners in Fish and Wildlife Program (602/242-0210 x250) 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 or emailed to MexGsnakeComments@fws.gov.