



News Release

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Arizona Ecological Services Field Office <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona>

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ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT PROTECTION PROPOSED FOR TWO SOUTHWEST GARTERSNAKES AND THEIR HABITAT

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to classify the northern Mexican gartersnake and the narrow-headed gartersnake as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (Act). Both snakes are predominantly aquatic; both occur in Arizona and New Mexico (the northern Mexican gartersnake also occurs in Mexico). The proposal to protect the species, to be published in the *Federal Register* tomorrow, also identifies habitat important to the conservation of both species. The Service is seeking comment on the proposals through September 9, 2013.

Northern Mexican gartersnake and narrow-headed gartersnake populations have declined primarily from interactions with nonnative bullfrogs, crayfish, and nonnative spiny-rayed fish. The nonnative species prey upon, or compete with, the gartersnakes and the native prey species that are vital to their existence. Human activities that diminish surface water or degrade streamside (riparian) vegetation are also significant threats, but particularly where they co-occur in the presence of nonnative species. Efforts to control nonnative predators and restore native aquatic and riparian communities could significantly benefit both gartersnakes and a suite of other imperiled native fish and amphibian species throughout their range.

“Many Americans’ earliest outdoor recollections include memories of frogs and gartersnakes at a family swimming hole,” said Steve Spangle, Arizona Field Supervisor. “Taking care of these Southwestern critters and habitats today, may guarantee our kids and grandkids can have such important experiences.”

The Service has identified areas in which Federal agencies can assist in the conservation of the species through habitat management. In total, approximately 421,423 acres, including 912 stream miles are being proposed as critical habitat for the northern Mexican gartersnake and 210,189 acres, along 1,503 stream miles are being proposed for the narrow-headed gartersnake in seven counties in Arizona and four counties in New Mexico. The northern Mexican gartersnake may occur along streams or use seeps, springs, cienegas, and ponds within regional grassland landscapes while the narrow-headed gartersnake occurs primarily along streams. There is overlap in the proposed critical habitat for these species.

Critical habitat is a term in the Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management considerations or protection. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, or establish a refuge or preserve, and has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits.

Some northern Mexican gartersnakes occupy stock tanks, or impoundments maintained by cattlemen as livestock watering holes. Today's proposal includes a special rule under Section 4(d) of the Act exempting operation and maintenance of livestock tanks on private, State, and tribal lands from the Act's prohibitions on "take" of listed species. Landowners will not be in violation of the Act should they or their livestock harass, harm or kill a gartersnake during normal use, operation and maintenance of their livestock tanks.

"Livestock operations do not pose a significant threat to either gartersnake; in fact many ranchers have created and maintain habitat for northern Mexican gartersnakes," said Spangle. "In 2002, we provided regulatory flexibility for livestock operators at threatened Chiricahua leopard frog waters. Their resulting stewardship has netted remarkable recovery advances for the frog – we anticipate similar results for the gartersnake."

The northern Mexican gartersnake can grow to 44 inches, and lives in dense vegetation along the banks or in the shallows of wetlands (cienegas and stock tanks) and stream pool or backwater habitats. Historically, the snake lived in perennial rivers, intermittent streams and isolated wetlands throughout the southern half of Arizona, extreme western New Mexico, and the Sierra Madre Occidental and Mexican Plateau in Mexico. Currently, within the United States, the northern Mexican gartersnake is believed to be constrained to the middle/upper Verde River drainage, middle/lower Tonto Creek, the San Rafael Valley, the Bill Williams River and a few isolated wetland habitats and stream reaches in southeastern Arizona. Its persistence in other areas is believed to be tenuous.

The smaller (up to 34-inch), narrow-headed gartersnake is the most aquatic of the southwestern gartersnakes and is a specialized predator on native fish species and trout found primarily in clear, rocky, higher-elevation streams along the Mogollon Rim from northern and eastern Arizona into southwestern New Mexico. Females of both species give live birth to their young.

Comments on the proposals to list the gartersnakes and designate critical habitat must be received by COB September 9, 2013, and can be submitted by one of the following methods:

- Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments on the critical habitat proposal and associated draft analyses to Docket No. FWS-R2-ES-2013-0022; or
- U.S. mail or hand-delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-R2-ES-2013-0022; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, MS 2042-PDM; Arlington, VA 22203.

More information on the proposed rule, maps, and other details about the gartersnakes are available online at: <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/>.

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