



## Questions and Answers: 2015 12-month Finding For the Sonoran Desert Tortoise

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office

[www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/)

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

**A:** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that listing the Sonoran desert tortoise as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) is not warranted at this time. The tortoise has been a [candidate](#) for ESA protection since December 2010 when the Service's initial status assessment indicated protection was warranted. Its candidate status is being withdrawn.

### **Q: What is the Sonoran desert tortoise?**

**A:** The desert tortoise is a member of the Testudinidae family (terrestrial tortoises) of turtles in the genus *Gopherus*, or gopher tortoises. Sonoran desert tortoises are land animals, recognized by their gray to orange-brown, high-domed carapace (upper shell) which displays visible growth lines radiating from the center of each scute (shell plate). The Sonoran desert tortoise may reach 8 to 15 inches in carapace length and four to six inches in shell height. Adult Sonoran desert tortoises may weigh 8 to 15 pounds. Primarily herbivores, Sonoran desert tortoises consume a variety of plant material in their diet such as fresh, residual, and dried annuals, perennials, and plant litter. Sonoran desert tortoises are largely inactive from mid-October to late February or early March while they overwinter in constructed burrows or rocky cavities or crevices, although they will surface to drink after rain events any time of the year.

### **Q: Where are Sonoran desert tortoises found?**

**A:** The Sonoran desert tortoise in the United States occurs east and south of the Colorado River. Sonoran desert tortoises are highly associated with both Mojave and Sonoran desertscrub communities but records also come from Madrean Evergreen Woodland, Semidesert Grassland, Interior Chaparral, Plains of Sonora, and Sinaloan Thornscrub habitats. In Mexico, the distribution of genetically distinct Sonoran desert tortoises extends from the International Border of Sonora and Arizona, south to the Rio Sonora. Please see Figure ES-1, below.

Unlike the Mojave desert tortoise that generally occupies desert valley floors, the Sonoran desert tortoise generally prefers rocky, steep slopes and bajadas (lower mountain slopes including alluvial fans — fan-shaped deposits at the ends of canyons formed when fast flowing streams slow and widen) and, to a lesser extent, others may occupy flatter terrain.

**Q: How did the Service arrive a “not warranted” finding in 2015?**

**A:** The Service collaborated with species experts from public and private sectors to complete the [Species Status Assessment Report](#) (SSA) for the Sonoran Desert Tortoise. The SSA Report documents the results of the comprehensive biological status review for the Sonoran desert tortoise and provides an account of the species’ overall viability through a forecasting of the species’ condition in the future. The purpose of the assessment was to inform the listing decision for the species under the ESA and also to serve as an information source to inform future conservation efforts.

The SSA addresses concerns about the tortoise’s status revolving around six primary risk factors: 1) altered plant communities; 2) altered fire regimes; 3) habitat conversion of native vegetation to developed landscapes (for agriculture, residential, etc); 4) habitat fragmentation; 5) human-tortoise interactions; and 6) climate change. Varying combinations of these threats were projected over the next 100 years and evaluated.

Geospatial analysis estimates there are presently 470,000 to 970,000 adult desert tortoises rangewide on approximately 38,000 square miles (sq mi) (24 million acres or 9.8 million hectares) of potential tortoise habitat ( 64% in the U.S. and 36% in Mexico) . The tortoise has not experienced any measurable reduction in its overall range and past population losses are presumed to be limited to urbanization in historical tortoise habitat. Of Arizona’s 1,279 sq mi currently designated as urban, less than five percent was modeled as potential tortoise habitat.

The tortoise has benefitted from ongoing and future conservation efforts through land management; an estimated 73% of potential habitat in the U.S. has some conservation management, and 55% of potential habitat in the U.S. was included in a recent interagency conservation agreement committing Federal land managers to continuing conservation efforts for the tortoise through existing regulations, laws, and policies.

The full SSA, including maps and an executive summary is available at:

[http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/Sonoran\\_Tort.htm](http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/Sonoran_Tort.htm)

**Q: Did adding the Sonoran desert tortoise to the list of candidate species provide any conservation benefit?**

**A:** The Sonoran desert tortoise was added to the list of candidate species eligible for ESA protection in 2010. While candidate species receive no statutory protection under the ESA, inclusion on the candidate list promotes cooperative conservation efforts for these species. The Service’s ultimate goal, which is shared by many state wildlife agencies, Tribal entities, private organizations and individuals, is to intervene and successfully address the needs of candidate species so that listing is no longer needed.

During the Sonoran desert tortoise’s tenure as a candidate species, land management agencies, Arizona Game and Fish Department, livestock operators and utility providers focused efforts on conserving Sonoran desert tortoises and their habitat.

The Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) finalized a Candidate Conservation Agreement (CCA) that: a) provides for monitoring of tortoise populations throughout its range; b) documents management practices in Sonoran desert tortoise habitat that are resulting in conservation of the species and it’s habitat; and c) encourages *ex situ* conservation and further research into the species’ life history, population biology and demographics, and distribution. The Parties to the agreement include BLM, Service, National Park Service, Department of Defense, Customs and Border

Patrol, Forest Service, National Resource Conservation Service, AGFD, and Arizona Department of Transportation.

Additionally, two Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (for non-Federal entities) are under development; a Statewide agreement (AGFD) and one for utility and transmission lines.

The Winkelman Natural Resources Conservation District (NRCD), in collaboration with Federal, State, and private parties, developed best management practices for livestock grazing in Sonoran desert tortoise habitat. The NRCD encourages other Arizona ranchers to adopt these practices.

**Q: What threatens the Sonoran desert tortoise?**

**A:** Continued analysis of the best available scientific and commercial information confirmed that altered plant communities, altered fire regimes, habitat conversion of native vegetation to developed landscapes (for agriculture, residential, etc), habitat fragmentation, human-tortoise interactions, and drought associated with climate change are stressors to the Sonoran desert tortoise. However, while these stressors can affect individual tortoises, our analysis and modeling of and with available data did not find conclusive evidence that population declines have persisted or are likely to in the foreseeable future. We recommend a thorough review of the SSA Report for a detailed treatment of our analysis and its findings.

**Q: Does this decision affect Sonoran desert tortoises held in captivity by private citizens?**

**A:** No. The Sonoran desert tortoise is currently a popular household pet for many Arizona families. Regardless of today's finding, both federal and state wildlife agencies strongly encourage private citizens to never release captive tortoises back into the wild. Released captive tortoises pose a threat to wild populations through the spread of disease and genetic contamination. There continues to be a surplus of Sonoran desert tortoises available for adoption through appropriate channels. Therefore, breeding captive desert tortoises is strongly discouraged, as this may hurt on-going conservation efforts for wild tortoises and contribute to the over-abundance of unwanted tortoises in captivity.

**Q: Does the Sonoran desert tortoise receive any protections outside of the Endangered Species Act?**

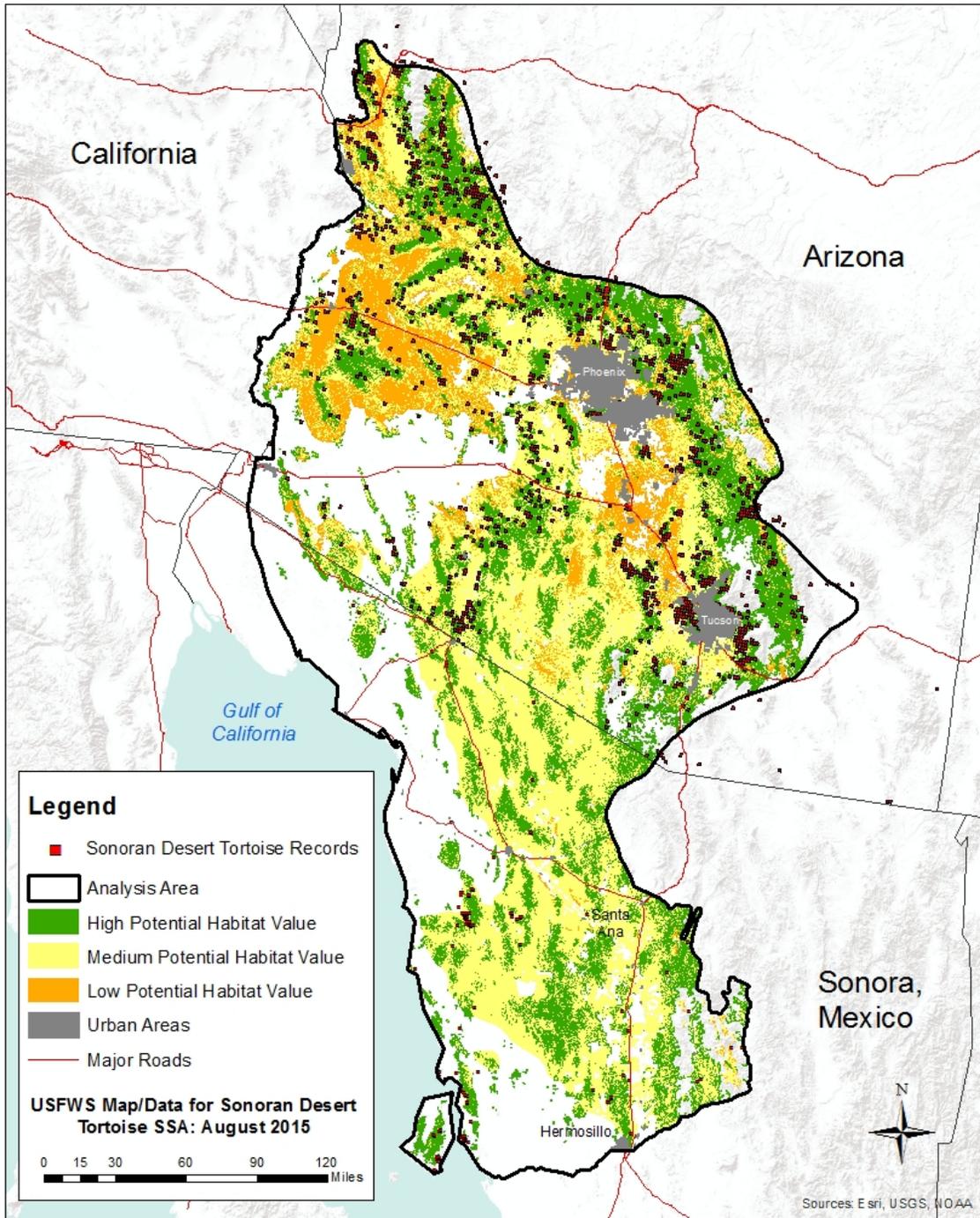
**A:** The Sonoran desert tortoise continues to be classified as a "Species of Greatest Conservation Need" by the Arizona Game and Fish Department and is listed under the Mexican equivalent to the Endangered Species Act as threatened. The collection of wild Sonoran desert tortoises in the United States remains prohibited.

**Q: Can I submit information on the Sonoran desert tortoise and the status assessment?**

**A:** The 12-month finding, the SSA and other Sonoran desert information are available at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/arizona/>.

Information regarding the status and conservation of, and any potential threats to, the Sonoran desert tortoise will be of value to future management of the Sonoran desert tortoise and may be submitted by mail to Field Supervisor, Arizona Ecological Services Office, 2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, AZ 85021-4951.

## Sonoran Desert Tortoise Locations in Predicted Potential Habitat



**Figure ES-1. Predicted potential habitat for the Sonoran desert tortoise based on elevation, slope, and vegetation type with tortoise occurrence records identified.** (From: Species Status Assessment Report for the Sonoran Desert Tortoise (SSA Report; Service 2015))