



News Release

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office
2321 W. Royal Palm Road, Suite 103
Phoenix, Arizona 85021
602/242-0210
602/242-2513 (Fax)

Arizona Ecological Services Field Office <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>

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Contacts: Jeff Humphrey or Jeff Servoss 602-242-0210
Elizabeth Slown or Victoria Fox 505-248-6911

PETITION TO PROTECT RARE SOUTHWEST GARTERSNAKE PROMPTS REVIEW OF STATUS

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has completed its preliminary evaluation of a petition to list the northern Mexican gartersnake as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) and determined that substantial biological information exists to warrant a more in-depth examination of its status. The Service has initiated a more thorough status review to determine whether protecting the snake as a threatened or endangered species is warranted. The review is scheduled for completion by Sept. 15, 2006. Historically the snake has inhabited parts of Arizona, western New Mexico and northern Mexico.

“We’ve reviewed the petition requesting protection for the northern Mexican gartersnake and found it merits further consideration,” said Steve Spangle, Arizona Field Supervisor. “We are requesting information regarding this gartersnake’s biology, past and current distribution, ongoing conservation of and threats to the snake and its habitat.” The petition was submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity.

This finding on the petition does not mean that the Service has decided it is appropriate to list the Mexican gartersnake. Rather, it is the first step in a process that triggers a more thorough review of all the biological information available. The status review will determine whether the Mexican gartersnake warrants listing as a threatened or endangered species.

To ensure this status review is comprehensive, the Service is soliciting information regarding the Mexican gartersnake and its habitat from State and Federal natural resource agencies and all interested parties. Information regarding the species and its habitat and comments or questions concerning the petition and finding 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 by March 6, 2006.

The northern Mexican gartersnake 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 professional expertise to distinguish the northern Mexican gartersnake subspecies from other gartersnakes.

Northern Mexican gartersnakes live in dense grasses along the banks or in the shallows of wetlands and streamside woodlands. They feed mainly in water on native fish and frogs and sometimes on earthworms, lizards, and small rodents. Females give live birth to their young.

The decline of northern Mexican gartersnakes appears to coincide with the expanding range of introduced non-native species – principally bullfrogs, largemouth bass and green sunfish – that deplete the prey of, and prey upon, the snake. Habitat loss is also a threat.

The species is believed to be currently limited to four areas in Arizona – the middle/upper Verde River including lower Tonto Creek, the Black River watershed, the upper Santa Cruz and San Pedro river watersheds, and the headwaters of the Rio Yaqui watershed. The species' current distribution in Mexico is uncertain and it is believed to be extirpated from New Mexico.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies. Visit the Service's website at <http://www.fws.gov>.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: A photograph of the northern Mexican gartersnake is available by contacting Jeff Humphrey (602-242-0210 or jeff_humphrey@fws.gov) or at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov> .