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# 'Horned toad' lizard's on again, off again saga as an endangered species



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The Press-Enterprise

A 16-year battle over the small, flat-tailed horned lizard -- a resident of sandy plains in the Coachella Valley and other patches of the Southwest -- has taken yet another twist, this time with a federal appeals court ruling that the small reptile again be considered for endangered species status.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service first proposed listing the lizard as a threatened species in 1993, then withdrew the action because of inconclusive evidence that the lizard population was declining. That prompted a lawsuit by the nonprofit Defenders of Wildlife and, in 2001, the lizard again was proposed for listing. That proposal also was withdrawn after the federal agency ruled that threats to the species were not significant.

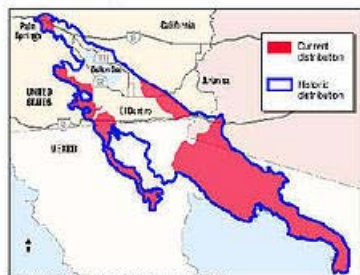
In the latest round, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco last month ordered Fish and Wildlife to reconsider listing the lizard based on information currently available.

Story continues below



## HABITAT OF THE FLAT-TAILED HORNED LIZARD

The 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ordered the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to reconsider listing the flat-tailed horned lizard as endangered. The reptile's habitat has shrunk by almost half due to development and other threats.



**Flat-tailed Horned Lizard**

- Disappeared from half its historic range because of farming, urban sprawl, off-road vehicles, etc.
- Survives in patches of Coachella Valley, Imperial and San Diego counties, Arizona and southwestern Mexico.
- Eats up to 200 insects per day.
- When threatened, flattens its body, closes its eyes and holds out its arms for camouflage.
- Females lay eggs once or twice a year.
- Horned lizard family includes eight species in the United States and Southwest.
- Nickname is "horned lizard" or "The Hokey Pokey."



"It's going to be 'third time's a charm,'" said Cameron Barrows, a biologist with Center for Conservation Biology at UC Riverside's Palm Desert campus and an expert tracker of the elusive lizards.

Barrows has spent 22 years studying the ant-eating creatures, dubbed "diminutive dinosaurs" by some. They are about 3½ inches long, with a dark stripe down their backs and dagger-like spines on their heads. Barrows has documented a 92 percent habitat loss -- from 32,000 acres to 2,700 acres -- in the Coachella Valley in the past half-century.

In addition to the Coachella Valley, the lizards also live in pockets in the sparsely vegetated valleys and flatlands of Imperial and San Diego counties, a sliver of southwestern Arizona and northwestern Mexico. In total, their habitat in the United States has lost an estimated 1 million acres -- half of their historical range -- and is the smallest range of any horned lizard in the United States. Federal protection would put additional restrictions on how the land in the lizards' habitat is used.

Barrows' monitoring is some of the only consistent tracking of the lizard, said Ilene Anderson, a biologist with the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the parties that filed suit to have the lizard listed as a threatened species.

"The problem here is that there hasn't been any really good monitoring of the animals, so we don't know exactly what's going on out there, except we do know there's increasing agricultural issues and off-road vehicles issues, etcetera. We're not sure what's happening with the population, because no one has been looking," she said.

Flat-tailed horned lizards are best known for their technique to evade predators. Rather than scurrying away as other lizards do, they flatten themselves to the ground and lie motionless, blending in with the desert floor or disappearing into the sand. They are threatened by urban, agricultural and energy development, off-road vehicles, military activity and non-native plants, Anderson said.

Birds of prey use fence posts and telephone poles to spot the lizards and eat them, Anderson said. And the animals' reluctance to move when disturbed makes them more likely to be killed by vehicles, Anderson said.

Scientists say preserving the lizard and other species is important because the greater genetic diversity, the better able they are to adapt to such conditions as disease and climate change. Intact ecosystems also help sustain humans by cleaning the water, moderating climate and providing more variety in food and medicine.

Fish and Wildlife officials and the Department of Justice are reviewing the appeals court ruling and deciding how to proceed, said Jane Hendron, spokeswoman for the Fish and Wildlife Service office in Carlsbad.

#### **SET-ASIDE SPACE**

One of the reasons the service withdrew its proposed listing was because of a pact signed by state and federal agencies in 1997 to preserve about 35 percent of the remaining U.S. habitat for the lizards, she said.

Updated in 2003, the plan looks at areas where the lizard lives and examines ways to manage the habitat for long-term conservation, including maintaining habitat corridors and prohibiting pesticide treatments that kill harvester ants, the reptile's primary food source, Hendron said.

"It looks at the entire range of the lizard and how the various agencies that manage the habitat can provide for long-term conservation of the species. It identifies specific action that each of those agencies should do to provide for the conservation of the species," Hendron said. The agencies include the federal bureaus of land management and reclamation, U.S. Navy and Marine Corps, the California Department of Fish and Game, Anza Borrego State Park and Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Off-road vehicle enthusiasts object to listing the lizard and said the existing management strategy to protect habitat is effective.

"The conservation agreement has already restricted OHV use," said Meg Grossglass, spokeswoman for the Off-Road Business Association, a Bakersfield-based trade group representing hundreds of retailers. "Every year we lose more and more and more area, and I'm not sure that's always scientifically based."

For instance, in El Centro area of Imperial County, OHV racing is prohibited on some trails in areas where it used to be allowed, because of the lizard, she said.

Environmentalists have belittled the management plan for failing to preserve enough of the lizard's primary range and say that even protected lands continue to be disturbed by off-roaders. Endangered species status ensures legal protection of lands or water that species need to survive and recover their populations, they said.

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