
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

50 CFR Part 17

Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Finding on a Petition To List the Jemez Mountains Salamander as Threatened or Endangered

AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service, Interior.

ACTION: Notice of petition finding; 12-month petition finding for the Jemez Mountains salamander.

SUMMARY: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announces a 12-month finding for a petition to amend the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants to include the Jemez Mountains salamander (*Plethodon neomexicanus*) as a threatened or endangered species. After review of information concerning the status of the species and proposed conservation measures designed to protect and maintain the species, the Service finds that listing the Jemez Mountains salamander is not warranted at this time.

DATES: The finding announced in this notice was made on February 11, 1992.

ADDRESSES: Information, comments, or questions concerning this notice should be submitted to the Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Field Office, 3530 Pan American Highway NE., suite D, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87107. The petition, findings, supporting data, and comments are available for public inspection, by appointment, during normal business hours at the above address.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Jennifer Fowler-Propst, Field Supervisor, at the above address (505-883-7877 or FTS 474-7877).

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:
Background

Section 4(b)(3)(A) of the Endangered Species Act (Act) of 1973, as amended (16 U.S.C. 1531 *et seq.*), requires that the Service make a finding on a petition to list, delist, or reclassify a species within 12 months of receiving the petition, and the finding is to be published promptly in the **Federal Register**. On February 21, 1990, the Service received a petition from Dr. James R. Dixon to list the Jemez Mountains salamander as a threatened or endangered species. On September 18, 1990, a notice of petition finding was published in the **Federal Register** (55 FR 38342). The notice stated that the petition presented substantial information indicating listing of the salamander as a threatened or endangered species may be warranted and a status review was initiated.

Requests for additional information concerning the present status of the Jemez Mountains salamander and threats to its continued existence were sent to 30 different Federal, state, and county agencies, public and private organizations, and various individuals. Nine responses were received. Of these, two provided additional status information, two supported listing, two indicated listing was not warranted at this time, one indicated that pumice mining was not a threat to the species, another requested the decision not be made until ongoing research is completed, and one response had no comment.

Within the Jemez Mountains, the species is known from 23 locations and has never been found in abundance at any one location. Between 1986 and 1989, 130 sites likely to support salamanders were visited. Of these sites, 16 were found to have 6 or more salamanders. The more intensive efforts to locate salamanders since 1985 have established them to be more widespread than previously believed. Adequate moisture conditions must prevail if the presence of salamanders in an area is to be confirmed, and the past 3 years of study have been comparatively dry years.

This finding is based on numerous documents including published and unpublished studies, agency documents, literature synthesis, and field reports.

The petition states that the major part of the salamander's range is in the Santa Fe National Forest and that the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) is in the process of increasing the intensity and frequency of logging within the range of the salamander. The petition also states that logging and associated activities such as road-building will have a pervasive effect on a large proportion of the range.

The threat of salamander habitat

being adversely affected by forest management practices has been removed by the development of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the Service, USFS, and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (Department), signed by all the parties on May 30, 1991. The MOA calls for the drafting of a Jemez Mountains Salamander Management Plan (Plan) within 3 years. The goal of the Plan will be to delineate actions which must be taken to ensure the long-term viability of all populations of the salamander on the Santa Fe National Forest through maintenance of habitat. The Plan will be incorporated into the Santa Fe National Forest Management Plan. The MOA also provides for the protection of salamander habitat during the 3 years the Plan is being developed by establishing areas (salamander conservation areas of SCA) where timber sales will not occur and other activities possibly detrimental to the salamander will be undertaken only after surveys and evaluation by the team. Additionally, salamander evaluation areas (SEA) have been established under the MOA which will be surveyed according to protocol and activities will be prohibited in stands where salamanders are found.

Current USFS policy is not to harvest timber from areas known to contain salamanders because the salamander is considered by USFS designation to be a sensitive species. Before a proposed timber sale in potential salamander habitat is allowed to proceed, a survey will be conducted to determine if salamanders are present. This survey is conducted according to an Interagency Protocol (Protocol) developed by the New Mexico Endemic Salamander Working Team (Team). The Protocol sets the standards under which a given area must be surveyed to determine if salamanders are present. If a salamander is found, the entire forest stand will then be excluded from the timber harvest unit. For example, if within a timber harvest unit, a salamander is found in an aspen stand, then the entire aspen stand is excluded from harvest.

The petition also states that the effects of logging on Jemez Mountains salamander populations are not known. It noted though, that soil disturbance, erosion, desiccation, increased temperature and insolation, and decrease in the number of large downed logs that accompany frequent and intensive logging may be extremely detrimental to salamander populations. The petition also said that studies designed to examine the direct effects of logging on salamander populations have been initiated by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish in

cooperation with the USFS, but they have not been fully implemented.

In 1986, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (Department) initiated studies of the natural history and biology of the species. Specifically, the Department is studying the distribution, population status, habitat associations, microhabitat use, and biotic and abiotic factors which may limit the distribution and abundance of the species. Study sites are established in occupied salamander habitat to verify the impacts of logging upon the salamanders. Under the MOA, the USFS is now cooperating to implement the salamander studies.

The petitioner expressed concern that although a cooperative interagency agreement establishing a New Mexico Salamander Management Team and specifying the responsibilities of the various agencies in assuring a secure future for the salamander was signed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish more than a year previously, the USFS had not yet approved the agreement. That agreement was an earlier version of the MOA that is now in effect.

Under the MOA, the Team, consisting of two members from the Service, the USFS, and the Department will aid in directing conservation and research efforts for the salamander. The team processes, evaluates, and disseminates information relative to endemic salamander conservation, reviews research proposals, advises and assists the respective agencies in the development and implementation of salamander management, and reviews and provides comments on proposed land disturbing activities scheduled to occur in the habitat of the salamander.

Based on the best scientific and commercial information currently available, the Service finds that the petition to list the Jemez Mountains salamander as endangered or threatened is not warranted at this time.

Author

This notice was prepared by Lorena Wada, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, P.O. Box 1306, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87103. (505/766-2914 or FTS 474-2914).

Authority: The authority citation for this action is 16 U.S.C. 1531-1544.

List of Subjects in 50 CFR Part 17

Endangered and threatened species, Exports, Imports, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements, and Transportation.

Dated: February 11, 1992.

Richard N. Smith,
Acting Director, Fish and Wildlife Service.
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