

Western plant, toad gain federal attention

By MARTIN GRIFFITH Associated Press Writer

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RENO, Nev.—Federal officials announced Thursday that a rare plant found in three Western states warrants protection under the Endangered Species Act, and a toad found only in Nevada will be studied to determine if it deserves a similar status.

In response to a request by two environmental groups, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed to study the Amargosa toad, which has a distinctive stripe down the back and is found exclusively in Oasis Valley about 120 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

The agency signed a conservation agreement with the Nevada Department of Wildlife and the Nature Conservancy in 2000 to protect the toad's habitat in an effort to avert a listing.

"We've been doing a lot of good things for the toad," said Bob Williams, Fish and Wildlife's supervisor for Nevada. "There are other species I have more concern about in the state than the toad."

But Rob Mrowka of the Center for Biological Diversity said the toad remains threatened by encroaching development, off-road vehicle use, groundwater depletions linked to mining and nonnative species such as crayfish and bullfrogs.

In February, his group and Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility petitioned Fish and Wildlife to review the status of the toad that is olive-colored with darker blotches and warts.

"Since these toads were first recognized as needing protection, threats to them have only increased," Mrowka said. "A growing human population, increased demand for water and climate change have placed the toad in immediate danger of extinction."

Williams said the toad's population has varied over the years depending on environmental factors, with an average of 5,600 toads a year. They're only found on a short segment of the Amargosa River in the Mojave Desert near Beatty.

A Colorado environmental group asked Fish and Wildlife to list the toad as an endangered species in 1995 after only 30 adults turned up in one survey. The request was rejected.

Fish and Wildlife will issue a decision on the latest request in about a year, Williams said.

Meanwhile, the agency announced the Goose Creek milkvetch plant warrants protection as an endangered species but won't get it right now because other species have higher listing

priority.

A low, tufted perennial with small pink-purple flowers and curved, brownish-red fruit pods, the species is found only in a 10-square-mile area of Cassia County, Idaho; Elko County, Nev.; and Box Elder County, Utah, in the Goose Creek drainage.

Fish and Wildlife was petitioned by Red Willow Research and 25 other parties in 2004 to list the plant. The service and several other agencies then initiated surveys of its distribution and abundance.

A 2007 wildfire burned 25 percent of the plant's occupied habitat in Nevada and Utah, and more than 50 percent of the known individuals of the species.

Agency officials said the plant will be added to the list of candidate species eligible for protection under the Endangered Species Act, but they'll work to protect the species and avert a listing.

On the Net:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: <http://www.fws.gov/>

Center for Biological Diversity: <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/>