

News

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### **Tortoise Racing Toward Extinction Groups Press for Answer on Request for Federal Protection**

Arizona, 1/28/09: Today, Western Watersheds Project and WildEarth Guardians filed a notice of intent to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) over the agency's failure to decide whether it will list the Sonoran desert tortoise population under the Endangered Species Act. An answer on the groups' petition requesting federal protection of the Sonoran desert tortoise was due earlier this month.

The groups' petition shows that Sonoran desert tortoises have declined by 51 percent since 1987, or about 3.5 percent annually, in areas monitored throughout the animal's range in Arizona. The groups hope to alert the Obama administration about the urgency of the Sonoran desert tortoise's situation. The Endangered Species Act requires sixty days to run before lawsuits can be filed over violations of the law. The sixty-day period was intended by Congress to allow violators to come into compliance without litigation.

"We are hoping the new administration will swiftly protect the tortoise and end this declining animal's unfortunate race toward extinction," stated Dr. Nicole Rosmarino of WildEarth Guardians.

"The widespread nature of these declines is really troublesome. The Service needs to act now to list the Sonoran desert tortoise and to provide the science-based guidance that is needed to manage our public lands to protect and conserve the tortoises and their habitat," stated Dr. Michael Connor of Western Watersheds Project.

The petition catalogues many threats that contribute to tortoise declines including disease, livestock grazing, mining, urban sprawl, use of off-road vehicles, border patrol activities, and a lack of adequate legal protections. Extended drought caused by climate change is an additional threat. Biologists fear that human activities combined with environmental stress may be increasing susceptibility to two diseases that are now becoming increasingly common among Sonoran desert tortoise populations. A disease epidemic led to emergency federal protection for desert tortoises found west of the Colorado River in 1989. Stated Connor, "The combined assault of threats such as development, cattle grazing, and disease are pushing Sonoran desert tortoises closer and closer to extinction."

If listed under the Endangered Species Act, Sonoran desert tortoises would be protected from "take" (including killing and harassment) of individual tortoises, and the Service would have to develop a recovery plan to map out the steps that must be taken to reverse the declines. The

Service would also have to identify critical habitat required by the tortoise so that it can be protected to aid the conservation and recovery of the species.

“The Sonoran desert tortoise population has been slashed in half over the past two decades. The Service passed up an earlier opportunity to protect this rare reptile, and the Sonoran desert tortoise is now in a race with extinction. The Service should not further delay federal protection,” stated Rosmarino.

WildEarth Guardians and Western Watersheds Project are region-wide conservation organizations with offices throughout the West, including Arizona.

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