



News Release

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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE LISTS CHIRICAHUA LEOPARD FROG AS A THREATENED SPECIES

The Chiricahua leopard frog has been given Federal protection as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today. The listing includes a special rule that encourages livestock owners in the Southwest to continue regular management of livestock water tanks that harbor frog populations.

The frog, native to the Southwest, is imperiled by nonnative predators, particularly fish, bullfrogs, and crayfish; loss of habitat, and potential natural events such as floods and drought. The species apparently has disappeared from entire mountain ranges, valleys and river drainages within its historic range. A species is designated as threatened when it is at risk of becoming an endangered species throughout all or a significant portion of its range.

“The Chiricahua leopard frog is a unique part of the Southwest’s limited aquatic resources that are threatened by the spread of exotic species. It is disturbing to see this frog’s decline and even disappearance throughout much of its range,” said H. Dale Hall, the Service’s acting Southwest Regional Director. “State and Federal agencies, area ranchers, high school students, and organizations already have invested much time and energy in the shared goal of conservation and restoration of Chiricahua leopard frog habitat and populations. Providing this protected status to the frog will further these recovery goals.”

The Chiricahua leopard frog is a medium-to-large sized frog from 2.1 to 5.4 inches in length. It is spotted and often greenish with a raised fold of skin running down each side of its back. The frog is found in ponds, streams, stock tanks, and other aquatic sites in the mountains of central and east-central Arizona and west-central New Mexico, and in the mountains and valleys of southeastern Arizona and extreme southwestern New Mexico. The species is also known from several sites in Chihuahua, and from single sites in Sonora and Durango, Mexico.

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A wide variety of organizations and individuals are involved in Chiricahua leopard frog conservation activities. The Nature Conservancy and New Mexico Game and Fish Department are undertaking conservation efforts on the Mimbres River. Ranchers in southeastern Arizona's San Bernardino Valley are working with the University of Arizona and San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge to enhance and maintain habitat for frogs. The Tonto National Forest, the Phoenix Zoo and the Arizona Game and Fish Department have reared frogs in captivity and established or reintroduced populations in the Gentry Creek area. Students at Douglas High School and Douglas Public School District in southeastern Arizona have created award-winning outdoor classrooms for the rearing of leopard frogs. These conservation efforts could be the basis of recovery planning for the species.

Biologists believe control of nonnative species will be necessary for the survival of the frog. With few exceptions, the frog occurs in areas that are not managed as sport fisheries. The Service also plans to work with other Federal agencies and local planning groups to restore and conserve wetlands that provide vital habitat for the species. A fungal disease, chytridiomycosis, linked to the global decline of frogs and toads has been identified in Chiricahua leopard frog populations and is contributing to the decline of the species.

Many Chiricahua leopard frog populations occupy stock tanks, or impoundments maintained by cattlemen as livestock watering holes. Area ranchers - some currently involved in frog recovery activities - have expressed concern that listing the Chiricahua leopard frog will deter landowners from volunteering to enhance frog habitat and restore frog populations on their land.

Hall noted that listing the Chiricahua leopard frog as a threatened species will give the Service greater flexibility to work with landowners to conserve the frog. The rule designating the frog as a threatened species also includes a special rule under Section 4(d) of the Endangered Species Act exempting operation and maintenance of livestock tanks on private, State, and tribal lands from the Act's prohibitions on "take" of listed Species. Landowners will not be in violation of the Act should they or their livestock incidentally harass, harm or kill a frog during normal use, operation and maintenance of their livestock tanks.

"Our consideration of all of the threats to the Chiricahua leopard frog, including contaminants, disease, collection and other factors, clearly indicate that the frog warrants the protection and recovery focus afforded under the Endangered Species Act. However, we recognize that the ranching community will continue to play a crucial role in the frog's recovery, and this rule gives them the flexibility to provide habitat for the frog while continuing their operations," Hall said.

In addition, Service biologists are working with local organizations to develop safe harbor agreements that will allow new partners in recovery to develop habitat on their private land while minimizing the regulatory burden that can accompany listed species. The Service has been working with individuals with ongoing frog recovery projects to expedite permitting requirements.

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The frog has been found at 231 sites in Arizona, 182 sites in New Mexico, and 12 or 13 sites in Mexico. The Chiricahua leopard frog has been extirpated from about 75 percent of these sites in Arizona and New Mexico. The status of populations in Mexico is unknown.

About 52 percent of the populations in existence since 1994 occur on U.S. Forest Service lands, mostly in the Coronado National Forest. Additional populations occur in the Apache-Sitgreaves, Tonto, and Coconino National Forests in Arizona and the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. The other populations occur primarily on private, Bureau of Land Management, and National Wildlife Refuge lands.

Critical habitat was not proposed for the frog. The Service found such a designation is not prudent after weighing the risk of illegal collection, vandalism, and potential disease transmission resulting from the required publication of location information against the benefits of any additional habitat protections afforded by a critical habitat designation.

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 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses more than 520 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 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 governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

<<http://southwest.fws.gov>>

Photos of the Chiricahua leopard frog are available on the Service's web site:
<http://arizonaes.fws.gov/amphibia.htm>.