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## Rare Amphibians and Reptiles in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas Closer to Endangered Species Act Protection

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.— In response to a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today [announced](#) that three Southwest amphibians and reptiles may qualify for Endangered Species Act protection. The Center [petitioned](#) for these species — the Rio Grande cooter, Arizona toad and Cascade Caverns salamander — in July 2012 because habitat loss and other factors are threatening their survival.

“The Southwest is home to some of the nation’s most fascinating scaly and slimy creatures,” said Collette Adkins, a Center biologist and lawyer who works to protect amphibians and reptiles. “Although few people have heard of, let alone seen, a Cascade Caverns salamander or Rio Grande cooter, these unique species are an important part of the web of life and of what makes the Southwest unique. Without Endangered Species Act protection, we’re likely to lose these rare turtles, toads and salamanders forever.”

Although amphibians and reptiles have been around for hundreds of millions of years and survived every major extinction period, now, due largely to human impacts, they’re dying off at up to 10,000 times the historic extinction rate. This loss is alarming because they play important roles as predators and prey in their ecosystems and are valuable indicators of environmental health.

“There’s broad scientific consensus that amphibians and reptiles face a profound, human-driven extinction crisis that requires prompt action,” said Adkins. “The Endangered Species Act has a nearly perfect record of stopping animals from going extinct — it’s hands-down our best tool for saving rare amphibians and reptiles.”

The Center was joined in its petition for these three species and dozens of other amphibians and reptiles by several renowned scientists and herpetologists, including E.O. Wilson, Thomas Lovejoy and Michael Lannoo. Also, more than 200 scientists sent a [letter](#) asking that the Service review the status of the petitioned animals.

Today’s “90-day finding” is the first in a series of required decisions on the petition and simply required the Fish and Wildlife Service to determine whether the petition presents sufficient information to warrant further consideration, a process that requires few agency resources. The next step is a full status review of the species by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

### Species Highlights

**Cascade Caverns salamander (Texas):** Perfectly adapted to their wholly aquatic life, these pale, ghost-like salamanders with external gills and recessed eyes spend their entire lives in the darkened worlds of Texas cave springs. Because they breathe through external gills and their skin, these highly unique amphibians require clean, clear-flowing water with a high content of dissolved oxygen. Their health is an important barometer of water quality. More and more pollutants, from pesticides and herbicides to fertilizers and household solvents, are showing up in surface and stormwater runoff that eventually finds its way into the underground springs where these salamanders previously thrived.

**Arizona toad (Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah):** These toads occur mainly in Arizona but also in southeastern Nevada, southwestern Utah and western New Mexico, where they depend on shallow, flowing, permanent water. Dams and reservoirs have dramatically altered waterways, replacing the flowing water preferred by Arizona toads with still water favored by Woodhouse’s toads, which displace and hybridize with Arizona toads. Hybridization and habitat loss are the biggest threats to the toads, which are now absent from more than 75 percent of their historic localities. Enlarged glands on the sides of their necks produce steroids that make Arizona toads unpalatable to some predators, inflaming the mouth and throat and causing nausea, irregular heartbeat, and, in extreme cases, death.

**Rio Grande cooter (New Mexico, Texas):** These beautifully marked turtles live in large, deep stream pools with relatively clear water and sandy or rocky bottoms in the Pecos-lower Rio Grande basin from New Mexico through Texas, as well as in Mexico. Scientists were unable to locate any young turtles in Texas, which is a troubling sign of a dying population struggling due to habitat degradation and overcollection. Intermittent stream flows from water diversions and flood control practices have made vast stretches of the Rio Grande uninhabitable, while river pollution by natural gas and oilfield runoff likely accounts for the apparent absence of the species over a 100-mile stretch of the lower Pecos.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 900,000 members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.

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