

## Jemez Mountain salamander placed on endangered species list

By Staci Matlock

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service added the Jemez Mountain salamander to the federal endangered species list Tuesday, ensuring that its habitat must be protected.

For New Mexico herpetologist Charlie Painter, who has championed the little salamander for more than two dozen years, the listing was long awaited and deeply welcome. “That’s really great news,” said Painter of the state Department of Game and Fish.

The federal agency listed recreation — camping, off-road vehicles and mountain biking — among the threats to the salamander’s already limited mountain habitat.

The listing could help Santa Fe National Forest defend an existing plan that limits off-road vehicle use in the Jemez Mountains, which has been challenged by off-road enthusiasts.

The slender salamander is found only in the Jemez Mountains in portions of Los Alamos, Rio Arriba and Sandoval counties.

The agency’s ruling is effective Oct. 10, and a designation of critical habitat for the salamander is expected soon.

The federal agency determined the salamander’s habitat is threatened by wildfires, forest composition, post-fire rehabilitation, forest and fire management, roads, trails, campers, off-road vehicles and even mountain bikes. In addition, the agency believes climate change will only make the impact of those threats worse for the salamander. Wildfires since 1997 have burned an estimated one-third of the salamander’s habitat.

Painter, who earned a national conservation award this year for his efforts on behalf of New Mexico amphibians and reptiles, said the Jemez salamander is elusive and hard to count. It is difficult to know just how many exist in the mountains. It spends much of its life underground, emerging when rains fall.

The Jemez salamander is a member of the plethodon family of lung-less salamanders that breathe through their skin, making moist forest conditions essential to their survival.

Their biology also makes the salamander a sort of litmus species for the health of the Jemez Mountains.

The Fish and Wildlife Service determined in 1991 that the Jemez Mountain salamander's population was "declining," but it took until now for the formal listing.

WildEarth Guardians, a nonprofit environmental group with a Santa Fe office, petitioned in 2008 to have the salamander listed under the federal Endangered Species Act. In a settlement, the federal agency agreed to make a decision by 2012.

"[The listing] means that the agencies that manage the lands where the salamander is found will have to get serious about protecting the animal, including forest management, fire suppression, fire rehab and, most notably, motorized recreation. It's going to be a real balancing act [for] the Forest Service," said Bryan Bird, wild places program director for WildEarth Guardians.

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