

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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## RECLASSIFICATION AND RULE CHANGES PROPOSED FOR SOME LOUISIANA ALLIGATORS; STATUS REVIEW ANNOUNCED

American alligators in nine parishes of Louisiana have been proposed for reclassification from "threatened" status to a somewhat less restrictive "threatened (similarity of appearance)" category, and the status of alligators elsewhere in Louisiana will be reviewed to determine if any other populations should also be proposed for reclassification, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

Along with the reclassification, the Service also proposed changes in the special rules applying to alligators. The major effects of the proposed reclassification and rule changes would be to allow an increased commercial harvest of alligators, permit the sale of some alligator meat (completely prohibited under present regulations), simplify administrative procedures for people who buy, tan, or fabricate alligator hides, and change regulations affecting import and export of alligators.

The proposed reclassification and rule changes and the notice of the status review are being published in the October 2, 1978, Federal Register. Interested persons have until December 26, 1978, to comment on these proposals. Public hearings will be announced soon.

Once in danger of extinction throughout most of its range, the American alligator has made a remarkable comeback in recent years under strict Federal and State protection. The U.S. alligator population is now estimated to total about 800,000. In 1977, about 75 percent of U.S. alligators were reclassified from the endangered species list to the threatened list. ("Endangered" means that a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. "Threatened," a less dire status, means that a species may become endangered within the foreseeable future.)

Because of substantial increases in alligator numbers, in 1976 the Governor of Louisiana petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to remove the American alligator from the endangered and threatened lists in southern Louisiana parishes. The Service has now reviewed all available data and has determined that the American alligator is no longer biologically threatened in nine parishes: Iberia, St. Mary, Terrebonne, Lafourche, St. Charles, Jefferson, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, and St. Tammany.

Instead of removing all Federal protection from these populations, however, the Service has proposed that they be reclassified to "threatened (similarity of appearance)." Alligators in this category are not considered to be biologically threatened, but some restrictions on commercial activities involving them must still be imposed to aid the law enforcement because they are indistinguishable from alligators that are endangered. Alligators in three other Louisiana parishes--Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu--have been classified as "threatened (similarity of appearance)" since 1975.

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The proposed reclassification would permit a controlled harvest of alligators in the nine parishes. In Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu parishes, where there are an estimated 100,000 alligators, the State of Louisiana has held several controlled hunts under Federal regulations.

The proposed changes in the special rules affecting alligators would permit the sale of meat from legally taken alligators within the State where the taking occurs, and where this activity is permitted and regulated through the imposition of licensing and recordkeeping requirements on those selling the meat. The State of Louisiana has imposed such controls. In addition to the federally controlled hunt in Cameron, Vermilion, and Calcasieu parishes, alligators may now be legally killed by Federal and State conservation officers, who must often remove sick or dangerous alligators.

Present regulations prohibit the sale of alligator meat but allow it to be given away or consumed by the hunters themselves. Consequently about 90 percent of the meat from these legally taken alligators is often wasted.

The proposed changes in the special rules would also permit alligators to be imported and exported if consistent with the alligator's status under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. At present, the alligator is listed on Appendix I of the Convention, which restricts international trade in endangered species for commercial purposes. At the next meeting of the Parties to the Convention, the United States will probably propose that the alligator be reclassified from Appendix I to Appendix II, which would remove the Convention's absolute restriction on international trade. If the alligator is reclassified to Appendix II, wild alligators from areas where the species is listed as "threatened (similarity of appearance)," could be exported and imported under certain conditions.

The proposed changes would also simplify application procedures and recordkeeping for people seeking licenses to buy, tan, or fabricate alligator hides. In addition, tanners would be required to apply a series of markings on the underside of tanned hides to enable wildlife enforcement officers to identify legally taken hides.

These proposed changes in the special rules would apply only to the three parishes where the alligator is now classified as "threatened (similarity of appearance)," to the nine parishes proposed for reclassification to such status, and to any other American alligators so classified in the future.

Although some alligator populations have increased, the continued modification of alligator habitat by humans and the past history of commercial exploitation of the species still give cause for concern about the alligator's future. The American alligator remains listed as endangered in Mississippi, Alabama, North Carolina, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and inland areas of South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas, and as threatened in Florida and coastal areas of South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Louisiana.

Comments on the proposals should be addressed to the Director (LE), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

Factual information, especially publications and written reports, that pertain to the status review of the American alligator in Louisiana should be addressed to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.