



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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**MOJAVE POPULATION OF DESERT TORTOISE LISTED AS THREATENED;
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE CITES HABITAT DEGRADATION, DISEASE**

The Mojave population of the desert tortoise, found in parts of four southwestern states, has been listed as a threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced today.

Today's listing, to be printed in the Federal Register, extends long-term protection to tortoises living north and west of the Colorado River, including eastern California, southern Nevada, northwestern Arizona, and southwestern Utah. The Mojave population had been listed under emergency provisions of the Endangered Species Act as endangered for an 8-month period that began in August 1989; that temporary protection expires April 2, 1990.

Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan said, "The desert tortoise is a symbol of the desert Southwest, and its fate is linked to the increasing number of uses that this unique region must accommodate. We intend to make every feasible effort to save the tortoise."

Desert tortoises from the Sonoran population, south and east of the Colorado River, will be treated as threatened whenever found outside their native range of Arizona and Mexico under "similarity of appearance" provisions in the Endangered Species Act. The two populations of tortoise closely resemble each other, and significant law enforcement difficulties would occur if the Sonoran animals were not protected when removed from their range.

In deciding to designate the Mojave population as a threatened species, the Fish and Wildlife Service cites habitat deterioration and loss, disease, and varied human uses of the desert as some of the principal threats facing the tortoise.

"Habitat is deteriorating and has been lost in many parts of the tortoise's range due to an accelerating rate of human

(over)

uses of the desert. Loss of habitat from a variety of human land uses has occurred throughout the Mojave Desert and is particularly acute in western Mojave, the Las Vegas area, and the St. George area of Utah," the Service's Federal Register announcement notes.

The upper respiratory disease syndrome that was the principal reason for the emergency listing of the Mojave tortoise in 1989 is also implicated as a natural factor continuing to threaten the survival of the population. The disease, noted among captive animals for years but previously unreported in wild tortoises until recently, is a debilitating condition of the upper respiratory tract. The cause of the disease is unknown and no cure exists.

Among other land uses affecting the Mojave tortoise population, in varying degrees, are conversion of land to agriculture, road construction, some military activities, energy and mineral development, and off-road vehicle use. Raven predation and collection also threaten the species.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director John Turner said, "as a threatened species, Mojave tortoises will be protected from killing, harm, collection, and trade in interstate or foreign commerce."

Under the Endangered Species Act, the term "threatened" means that a species is likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future. Federal agencies, or projects on Federal land or under Federal license or permit, also are required to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service if impacts on the species are foreseen.

Desert tortoise populations occur largely on public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the four state area. BLM began implementation of its Desert Tortoise Rangeland Strategy Plan early last year. The plan provides goals and management actions to be used by BLM field managers to improve desert tortoise populations on the public lands. BLM Director Cy Jamison said that his agency will be a full partner in ensuring the survival and recovery of the threatened species.

Today's announcement concludes an 8-month evaluation by the Service's Pacific regional office, headquartered in Portland, Oregon, including a 98-day public comment period and three public hearings in the Southwest. Of the 1,900 written and oral comments received from the public and interested organizations, 67 percent supported listing for all or part of the population's range and 33 percent opposed listing.