



Contact

Debbie Freeman (602) 789-3215
Public Information Officer
Arizona Game and Fish Department

Jeff Humphrey (602) 242-0210, Ext. 222
Public Outreach Specialist
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

NEWS RELEASE

For immediate release [June 28, 2005](#)

Endangered fish species rescued from Cave Creek Complex fire

PHOENIX — While firefighters work hard to protect people and homes from the flames of the Cave Creek Complex fire, some smaller fire victims are safe today, thanks to the work of a team of eight biologists. On Saturday, a crew of wildlife workers from the Arizona Game and Fish Department, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Forest Service collected and rescued about 200 federally endangered Gila topminnow from the fire's path.

"We realized they were in trouble and wanted to do something right away to ensure their safety," says Chris Cantrell, a biologist with the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

"Even though the fish live underwater and might survive the fire, they were in danger of suffocating if monsoon rains came during or just after the flames and washed large amounts of ash into the creek," says Glen Knowles, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, "so under the supervision of the fire incident commander, a rescue plan was developed, approved, and carried out."

Cantrell, Knowles, and a half-dozen others hiked four miles in the vicinity of the huge fire to Lime Creek for the Gila topminnow rescue. The biologists then used nets to remove the small fish from the creek. They carried the fish out in bucket-like containers rigged up to wear like backpacks.

"This rescue shows the passion our biologists have for wildlife," says Eric Gardner, head of the Arizona Game and Fish Department's nongame branch.

"The Lime Creek Gila topminnow population is the longest re-established population of Gila topminnow, making it very valuable to recovery of the species," says Doug Duncan, a biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Also, Lime Creek has one of the largest populations of Gila topminnow anywhere."

The fish were taken to the Bubbling Ponds Hatchery in Page Springs until the water in Lime Creek is secure and clean enough to bring them back. However, it could take months before biologists are sure about the timing of the Gila topminnows' return.

"We need to wait and see the true effects of the fire on the drainage in the area," says Gardner. "Monsoon rains may flush out the system, or we might have to wait for later rains."

Jeff Whitney, a desert fish coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is the leader of one of only 16 national teams that handle incidents like the Cave Creek Complex fire. It's a coincidence that his team was also assigned to this particular fire, and he's heading up 900 firefighters' efforts as incident commander. He says this fish rescue was a demonstration of great teamwork.

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“This was a tremendous opportunity to use the long-term partnership between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, and the U.S. Forest Service to move an endangered species out of harm’s way and also to strengthen our cooperative relationships,” Whitney says.

The Gila topminnow is a tan- to olive-colored fish that grows to be about two inches long. At one time, it was the most common fish in the Gila River basin. The introduction of many other fish species with longer breeding seasons and higher reproductive rates has contributed to the Gila topminnows’ population decline. The fish currently only lives in parts of Mexico and the Gila River drainage in Arizona. The species has been federally listed as endangered since 1967.

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Note to media: A photo and file video of Gila topminnow are available by calling Arizona Game and Fish Department Public Information Officer Debbie Freeman at (602) 789-3215.

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