



News Release

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AGENCIES PLAN TO REESTABLISH ARIZONA POPULATION OF TARAHUMARA FROGS

After a 20-year absence, Arizona's native Tarahumara frog may be returning to isolated bedrock plunge pools deep within canyons in a couple of remote mountain ranges near the U.S.–Mexico border.

A team of federal, state, Mexican, University of Arizona, and Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum biologists have identified two possible sites to reestablish Tarahumara frogs – Big Casa Blanca Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains and Sycamore Canyon in the Pajarito Mountains, both in the Coronado National Forest in Santa Cruz County.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has drafted an environmental assessment of the planned reintroduction and is requesting public review and comments on the proposal at this time. The Forest Service and Arizona Game and Fish Department are simultaneously conducting their review and permitting processes. The Tarahumara frog does not presently warrant protection under the federal Endangered Species Act, yet it is recognized on Arizona's draft list of species of concern.

“Returning this native to a portion of its U.S. range will help restore the biological diversity and brings us closer to making this unique ecosystem whole again,” said Dale Hall, Director of the Service's Southwest Region. “Hikers, recreationists and wildlife watchers might be able to observe one of our rarest native species in these two renowned locations.”

Historically, the range of the green-brown, 2½ to 4½-inch frog extended north from Mexico's Sierra Madre Occidental range to 6 locations in the Santa Rita Mountains and the Atascosa-Pajarita-Tumacacori mountains complex, north and west of Nogales, Arizona. Pools in the inner reaches of these canyons hold water year-round, providing frogs with breeding habitat, and ample rocks and boulders provide refuge from predators and freezing temperatures. The last U.S. sighting of Tarahumara frogs was in Big Casa Blanca Canyon in the Santa Rita Mountains in May 1983. Possible causes of their extirpation are winter cold, flooding or severe drought, competition, predation, disease and heavy metal poisoning.

The Service's draft assessment identifies contaminants and disease as concerns to the frog, and addresses the effects of the proposed reintroduction on livestock grazing, mining, fire management and sensitive species. The team has developed a draft protocol for the rearing, moving, and monitoring of frogs to reduce threats to the frogs.

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Area ranchers expressed concerns over the effects to their livestock operations should the Tarahumara frog be added to the federal endangered species list. Cattle ranching and Tarahumara frogs coexisted for many decades in most locations in Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. In Sycamore Canyon, livestock grazing is presently excluded from historic Tarahumara frog habitat locations and the best frog habitats in the rugged Big Casa Blanca Canyon site are virtually inaccessible to cattle. Because Tarahumara frogs are so habitat- and water-dependant, it is unlikely that frogs would move to rangelands outside of their release drainages. As a result, in the unlikely event that the Tarahumara frog is added to the federal list of threatened or endangered, changes in livestock management would probably not be needed to either maintain populations or minimize harm to frogs. Federally listed Chiricahua leopard frogs, Sonora chub, and Mexican spotted owls occur in both proposed Tarahumara frog reintroduction drainages. As with livestock grazing, if management of mining and fire is adequate for maintenance and recovery of species already listed, then management should be adequate for Tarahumara frogs, as well.

Copies of the draft environmental assessment are available on the Internet at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov> or by contacting the Field Office Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2321 W. Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona, 85021-4951 or by calling (602) 242-0210. Comments may be sent by mail to the Field Office Supervisor or by facsimile at (602) 242-2513. In order to be considered in the decision making process, comments must be received by October 15, 2003.

The Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 542 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photographs of the Tarahumara frog and its habitat, and additional information on the frog are available on the Internet at <http://arizonaes.fws.gov>.