

[4310-55]

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

Fish and Wildlife Service

[50 CFR Part 17]

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED WILDLIFE
AND PLANTSReview of the Status of the Desert Tortoise,
*Gopherus agassizii*AGENCY: Fish and Wildlife Service,
Interior.ACTION: Review of the status of the
desert tortoise.

SUMMARY: The Service will review the status of the desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii*, to determine if it should be proposed for listing as an Endangered or Threatened species. Information is also solicited on areas which may be Critical Habitat should a proposal for listing be warranted. This action is being taken because a rapidly accumulating amount of information indicates that tortoise populations are declining throughout much of the known range, particularly as a result of overgrazing, which causes both direct harm to the tortoises as well as competition for forage, destruction of habitat for agriculture and off-road vehicle use, collection of individuals which may have seriously altered natural population structure, and killing and maiming by thoughtless individuals, particularly along highways. The information received as a result of this notice will be used to assist the service in determining the status of this species.

DATES: Information regarding the status of this species should be submitted on or before November 22, 1978.

ADDRESS: Comments on this notice of review should be submitted to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION
CONTACT:

Mr. Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director—Federal Assistance, Fish and Wildlife Service, Washington, D.C. 20240, 202-343-4646.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

BACKGROUND

The desert tortoise, *Gopherus agassizii*, is a long-lived inhabitant of the desert areas of the Southwestern United States (California, Nevada, Utah, and Arizona) and adjacent areas of Mexico as far south as southern Sonora. Few populations of this species have been extensively investigated, although the data presently available indicate that the species may be

declining throughout significant portions of its range. Preliminary work in two areas in Arizona indicates that the tortoise is declining and that populations are not in good condition; and recently the Desert Tortoise Council petitioned the Fish and Wildlife Service to list the Beaver Dam Slope population in Utah as Endangered and presented substantial data in support of the petition. Extensive surveys by the Bureau of Land Management and Department of Fish and Game in California have also documented declines in certain populations. The chief threats to the tortoise appear to be from habitat destruction because of overgrazing and the extensive use of the desert by off-road vehicles (ORV's). In addition, cattle may be competing with the tortoise for forage, trampling burrows and cover, and stepping on young tortoises. In the past, collection of individuals for pets have been a severe problem.

All the States where the desert tortoise is found now protect the species. The Service recognizes the efforts of the States on behalf of *Gopherus agassizii* but does feel that a comprehensive review of the status of this species throughout its range is warranted.

The Service is seeking the views of the Governors of Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, as well as the Government of Mexico, and is soliciting from them information on the status of this species within their jurisdictions. Other interested parties are invited to submit any factual information, especially publications and written reports, which is germane to this status review.

This notice of review was prepared by Dr. C. Kenneth Dodd, Jr., Office of Endangered Species, 202-343-7814.

NOTE: The Service has determined that this document does not contain a major action requiring preparation of an Economic Impact Statement under Executive Order 11949 and OMB Circular A-107.

Dated: August 11, 1978.

LYNN A. GREENWALT,
Director,
Fish and Wildlife Service.

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