

GREENWIRE

'Wary' pond turtles are now in the clamorous ESA arena

The Fish and Wildlife Service has already received a lot of input on its proposal to list two species of turtles as threatened.



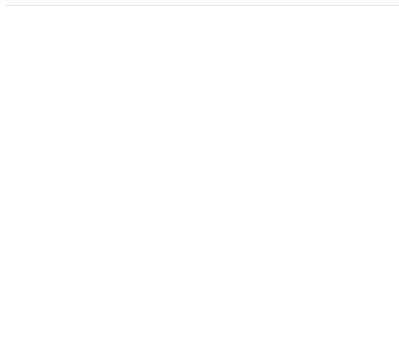
BY: **MICHAEL DOYLE** | 04/04/2024 01:19 PM EDT



A western pond turtle from California. | Yathin S Krishnappa/Wikimedia

GREENWIRE | Fish and Wildlife Service proposals to protect two species of western pond turtles have spurred a lively debate that's now going into extra innings.

More than 16,000 public comments have already been recorded in response to the federal [agency's dual proposals](#) to list the northwestern pond turtle and southwestern pond turtle under the Endangered Species Act.



Citing the need for "having a robust public engagement process," the Fish and Wildlife Service this week extended a public comment period until May 5.

There's already been a lot of input.

"I think that nobody questions or has any doubt that [the species] are declining or are in trouble," JJ Apodaca, executive director of the nonprofit Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, said in an interview Thursday. "A lot of people are doing a lot of good conservation work. So the question is, is that enough? And, does listing harm some of those efforts in terms of taking away some of the flexibility of conservation actions that are taking place?"

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, which works with some federal agencies on specific conservation projects, has not taken a formal position in the listing proposals. Others most definitively have.

"It is ... exceptionally presumptuous and irresponsible to advance this proposed listing based on 'data' that has been formulated through conjecture," declared Rose Winn, natural resource consultant for the California Four Wheel Drive Association.

Winn's written denunciation of the two ESA listing proposals posted in early December has subsequently been echoed by others.

The California Cattlemen's Association and allied farm groups said that ESA listings would "impose broad-ranging regulatory restrictions over more than 100 million acres," while Bernadette Graham Hudson, wildlife division administrator with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, cited "uncertainty in the analysis" undertaken by the Fish and Wildlife Service and the "limited consideration" given to regional variations in the turtles' status.

But Jeff Miller, senior conservation advocate with the Center for Biological Diversity, called for prompt Fish and Wildlife Service action, something the environmental group has been pushing for on behalf of the pond turtles for upward of a dozen years.

"Both species have suffered significant declines due to habitat loss and fragmentation from urban development, agriculture, and dams," Miller wrote, adding that "they also are being hit hard by disease, invasive species, and climate change."

The northwestern pond turtle lives in Washington, Oregon, Nevada, and Northern and central California. The southwestern pond turtle inhabits a region from California's Monterey County south into northern Baja California in Mexico.

Last October, following up on a multi-species petition filed in 2012 by the Center for Biological Diversity, and after being pressed by subsequent litigation over missed deadlines, the Fish and Wildlife Service proposed listing both species as threatened.

"Food, water and shelter for northwestern pond turtles and southwestern pond turtles are becoming scarce across the western United States," Paul Souza, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Southwest Region, said at the time, adding that "we need everyone's support to help them thrive in the wild."

At the time of the original 2012 petition, the western pond turtle was considered a single species, but scientists later determined in 2014 that the northwestern and southwestern pond turtles were distinct from each other.

They are medium-sized and can be long-lived, with the Fish and Wildlife Service taking note of "one individual living to at least 55 years of age." They can also be shy.

"Western pond turtles are extremely wary and will rapidly flee from basking sites or dive when on the water surface when disturbed by the sight or sound of people at distances of greater than 100 meters," the Fish and Wildlife Service reported.

According to the agency's modeling, the probability of extinction of the northwestern pond turtle by 2075 ranges from 28 percent to 41 percent. The extinction likelihood is estimated to increase after that.

For the southwestern pond turtle, the Fish and Wildlife Service calculates the chance of extinction is over 50 percent by 2075 and over 70 percent by 2100.

The agency has not yet proposed critical habitat for the two species under ESA consideration, explaining that a "careful assessment of the economic impacts that may

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