

Groups threaten legal action for lizard in the NM oil patch

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A small lizard native to southeast New Mexico became the latest animal to spark a debate between environmentalists, the federal government and oil and gas operators.

The dunes sagebrush lizard remained unlisted as endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, despite its habitat shrinking to only about 655 square miles in the Mescalero Sands area, east of Artesia and northern Eddy County, per a report from the FWS.

On July 19, a team environmentalist groups threatened to sue the federal government for its alleged inaction.

The dunes sagebrush lizard was described as light brown and spiny, with stripes on the body. It's only active between April and October in large sand dunes throughout southeast New Mexico in Eddy, Lea, Chaves or Roosevelt counties. It only grows to about 2.8 inches long and was first recognized as a species in 1992.

The lizard is listed as endangered by the state Department of Game and Fish and was a candidate for federal listing since 2001.

Since 2002, the Center for Biological Diversity, the Wild Earth Guardians and Defenders of Wildlife have filed petitions for a listing of threatened, contending the lizard could become endangered in the future. The petitions pointed to “widespread” oil and gas development, as 40 percent of sagebrush’s natural habitat was lost, with 35 percent comprised by petroleum wells.

On July 19, Defenders of Wildlife filed a notice with the Interior and FWS of its intent to sue the government agencies for their alleged failure to respond, giving the government 60 days to respond.