Written by Staff Reports
Friday, 31 July 2020 03:30

Drilling, sand mining, herbicides imperil rare lizard in New Mexico, Texas

SILVER CITY — The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced July 15 that the Dunes Sagebrush Lizard may warrant protection under the Endangered Species Act and initiated a year-long status review.

Found only in the Permian Basin of West Texas and southeastern New Mexico, the lizard historically possessed the second-smallest range of any North American lizard. It was first identified as needing protection in 1982 and proposed for listing as an endangered species in 2010. However, opposition from the oil and gas industry has prevented that much-needed step.

Over the years this three-inch lizard lost more of its unique habitat to fossil fuel development and to herbicide spraying for ranching.

“Ants and small beetles may tremble at the sight of this lizard, but it’s been in the fight of its life against the behemoth oil and gas industry,” Michael Robinson at the Center for Biological Diversity said. “Federal protection is all that stands between the Dunes Sagebrush Lizard and extinction.”

Although fracking and drilling have declined dramatically this year, the lizard's shinnery oak dunes habitat, where three-foot-high oak shrubs anchor the shifting dunes and shade them for the lizard, has suffered dramatic losses over the decades. Those shinnery oak-dominated dunes comprise just two percent of the Permian Basin overall, but 100 percent of where Dunes Sagebrush Lizards live. A resurgence of fracking and drilling, which is likely, will pose serious danger to the lizard.

"After years of political back and forth, it's time to finally give the Dunes Sagebrush Lizard the federal protections it desperately needs," Jason Rylander, senior counsel for Defenders of Wildlife, said. "Though this is only the first step on the road to recovery, we are hopeful for the future of this species."

The Permian Basin is the largest onshore oil and gas field in the U. S. Construction and installation of roads, well pads and pipelines, along with sand mining for use in fracking, destroy the dunes, the oaks and interspersed grasslands.

Moreover, airborne toxic gases from drilling settle on the ground, killing lizards, as well as their invertebrate prey.