

This lizard doesn't need legs, it needs land

Written by Staff Reports

Friday, 06 November 2020 05:55



[The Center for Biological Diversity petitioned](#) the Secretary of the Interior for protection for the Temblor legless lizard on Oct. 20. The lizard, which swims through sand, only survives in four places, one of them is central California's Kern County, more than 98 percent of which is open to oil and gas development.

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“Rampant oil drilling is causing double damage to the legless lizard by destroying habitat and accelerating climate change,” Center conservation advocate Jeff Miller said.

“We can't continue to allow habitat loss and increased wildfire risk at the hands of fossil fuel developers whose sole concern is profit.”

The entire range of the Temblor legless lizard is a narrow strip of habitat on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley in western Kern and Fresno counties, between the Temblor Range and Highway 33, from McKittrick to Coalinga. This lizard species has only been found at four sites, two located southeast of the Temblor Mountains and another two in Antelope Plain and Pleasant Valley.

The lizards live mostly underground, but come to the surface to feed on insects. Being legless is an adaptation that allows them to swim through loose, sandy soils. Their preferred habitat is sandy soils in alkali desert scrub or annual grasslands. They require loose, moist soil for burrowing and need plant cover and a layer of leaf litter for feeding and protection from predators.

Most suitable habitat is privately owned and often developed for oil and gas drilling in Kern County, California's largest oil-producing county.

Six new California state permits issued the week of Oct. 12, for up to 47 new fracking incidents, are all in the imperiled lizard's range. The Bureau of Land Management recently approved the first oil and gas lease sale of federal public lands in California in eight years, covering 4,000 acres in Kern County, including one large parcel at the southern end of the Temblor legless lizard's range.

In 2015 Kern County began issuing over 1,000 oil and gas permits each year without environmental review after it adopted an ordinance to streamline oil and gas permitting for up to 72,000 wells. This year a court invalidated the ordinance and its supporting “environmental impact report” for failing to fully evaluate and disclose the environmental damage that would occur. But the county plans to readopt the measure, aiming to bypass environmental review for

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future oil and gas projects.

Oil and gas development damages lizard habitat by compacting the soil, changing soil moisture levels, removing plant cover and the leaf-litter layer, and releasing spills of oil and chemicals. Legless lizards are also highly sensitive to the noise and light generated by drilling operations, climate change, wildfires, invasive species and by habitat loss from urban development and the construction of large-scale solar projects.

The Los Padres Forestwatch says the lizard is dependent on a litter layer for moisture and is likely vulnerable to wildland fire. Off-highway vehicle use can trample lizards and their burrows. Additional threats to the lizard's habitat include development, recreation (especially in coastal dune areas), and the introduction of nonnative plants (such as the ice plant).

To help protect the California legless lizard and its habitat, ForestWatch is working to protect the chaparral ecosystems on which the lizard depends for survival. ForestWatch also supports efforts to control and manage the spread of invasive nonnative plants, to maintain the habitat condition of riparian areas and restore damaged areas, and to provide linkages to open space reserves outside national forests.

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