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If Left to Stand, Recent BLM Public Lands Rule Will Be a Boon for At-Risk Endemic Species

Rule Will Boost National Nonprofit's Work to Restore Habitats on Public Lands

UNITED STATES, May 8, 2024 - Efforts to restore critical habitats for the most endemic, at-risk terrestrial vertebrates in the US will be bolstered by the recently finalized Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Public Lands Rule. The rule, which prioritizes the restoration and conservation of BLM lands equally with energy development, livestock grazing, and other uses, will be a boon for amphibians and reptiles, many of which are highly specialized species with narrow ranges.

The Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC), a national nonprofit to conserve imperiled wildlife, is safeguarding imperiled species through targeted restoration of their habitats, many of which occur on BLM lands. Assuming the rule is able to withstand the pushback it's expected to receive, it'll provide more opportunities for the organization to conduct amphibian and reptile habitat restoration on lands managed by BLM.

"This rule could make a big difference for species like the Chiracahua leopard frog and northern Mexican garter snake, which are only found in the Southwestern US and parts of Mexico," explained ARC Executive Director JJ Apodaca. "Much of their narrow ranges are on public lands that have been degraded due to extractive uses, and so the focus of this new rule on protecting and restoring wildlife habitats is key. After all, if the conditions these species need disappear, so will they."

Unfortunately, this risk is heightened for amphibians, which rank highest in the number of endemic species of any terrestrial vertebrate group in the country. Reptiles are not far behind.

These typically small animals tend to have more restricted geographic ranges and narrower niche requirements than other vertebrates. This means they are highly susceptible to threats like habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation.

This is why ARC is focused on habitat restoration for imperiled species across the US, and a large percentage of the lands on which the organization works are managed by BLM.

The organization has strategic restoration projects underway in dozens of PARCAs, or Priority Amphibian and Reptile Conservation Areas, they've identified as critical places for these species throughout the country. A mix of public and private lands are found within the boundaries of PARCAs, which also cross state lines because wildlife isn't constrained by them.

"Our goal in PARCAs is simple: enhance and protect the habitat of imperiled amphibians and reptiles so that they have what they need to thrive, and the new rule's focus on science-based decision making for species is going to allow us to do so on a broader scale," said Apodaca.

Although the goals are simple, the work can be complex. Because ARC is working to restore a wide range of habitats, from arid landscapes dotted with towering cacti to forested rivers to desert wetlands, every restoration project in every PARCA looks different.

For example, in the Cochise PARCAs of Arizona's Sonoran Desert, the organization is working with federal partners, including BLM, to restore mountain wetlands for federally listed Threatened Chiracahua leopard frogs and northern Mexican garter snakes, along with hundreds of other species. Over the last century, a large number of these wetland habitats have been lost or degraded due to development, unsustainable livestock grazing, groundwater pumping, and water diversion.

To return these critical refuges to the region's dry lands, ARC Biologists' efforts range from restoring the topography with heavy machinery to removing invasive species. With a variety of actions, such as removing nonnative cattails that crowd out native plants and alter the site's hydrology, they are working to repair these wetlands.

"With these actions and the expanded opportunities with restoration leases and other initiatives resulting from the new rule, we can ensure that Chiricahua leopard frogs have ponds to breed; northern Mexican garter snakes have places to find food; populations of wildlife and plants are connected to allow for gene flow; and much more," stated Apodaca.

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)
Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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