

**A Revised Roadmap for Recovery:
Service Seeks Public Review of New Draft Giant Garter Snake Recovery Plan**

Sacramento - The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) is seeking public input on a revised draft recovery plan for the giant garter snake. The recovery plan outlines a path to self-sustaining, healthy populations of the native California snake, listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The plan covers nine areas in the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys. With only 5% of the snake's original habitat remaining, the plan describes opportunities to recover the giant garter snake throughout its range.

The ultimate goal of the ESA is to prevent the extinction of imperiled species and recover their populations so that they no longer require federal protections. Recovery plans are science-based advisory documents for the Service, states, and partners, designed to facilitate the successful recovery of species. As such, they contain suggested conservation strategies that are entirely voluntary. The Service developed this revised draft with public and partner engagement, evaluating public comment from the previous draft, new information about the needs of the species. The plan does not set any new regulations or provide for land or water restrictions. Rather, the strategy suggests protecting areas where the species is currently found, restoring additional areas to ensure connectivity, and improving water quality and reliability.

"This plan provides a detailed road map for the Service and its partners to successfully recover the giant garter snake," said Jennifer M. Norris, Field Supervisor for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services' Sacramento Field Office. "With the help of the public, diverse stakeholders and species experts, we are helping ensure this protected species thrives once again."

Wetland habitat loss is the most pressing condition that must be addressed in order to recover the species. California has lost 90% of the wetlands that used to provide clean water, flood protection and habitat in the Central Valley for the giant garter snake and several other species. Other threats to the snake include predation by non-native species, drought, climate change, poor water quality and roads.

For recovery purposes, the draft revised recovery plan highlights nine giant garter snake population areas and the actions needed for recovery in each of the watershed basins they occupy: Butte Basin, Colusa Basin, Sutter Basin, American Basin, Yolo Basin, Delta Basin, Cosumnes-Mokelumne Basin, San Joaquin Basin and Tulare Basin. It lays out broad goals of developing self-sustaining wild populations of the species, reducing or eliminating threats to it and restoring a healthy ecosystem. Strategies for achieving recovery are laid out for each basin. Finally, the recovery plan will improve scientific understanding of the giant garter snake's life cycle and needs through research and monitoring.

The giant garter snake has specific habitat needs that include summer aquatic habitat for foraging, bankside basking areas with nearby emergent vegetation for cover and thermal regulation, and places upland where it can hide for extended periods of inactivity. Perennial wetlands provide the highest quality habitat for the giant garter snake, and rice

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lands, with their interconnected structures of moving water, serve as an alternative habitat in the absence of higher quality wetlands. Giant garter snake recovery is consistent with current rice agricultural practices.

Other species that share habitat needs with the giant garter snake and will benefit from restoration and recovery efforts include; the Buena Vista Lake shrew, the western pond turtle, tricolored blackbird, yellow-headed blackbird, northern harrier, least bittern, fulvous whistling duck, redhead and the black tern. Management efforts that help recover the giant garter snake will be good for Pacific Flyway waterfowl as well.

The Service is seeking comments that provide new information pertinent to the plan, such as observed occurrences of the snake and new scientific information or evaluation of the plan's recovery elements. The 60-day comment period will close on February 22, 2016.

On Tuesday, February 2, 2016 at 11 a.m., there will be a public webinar to explain the plan and answer questions. For registration information, please email josh_hull@fws.gov.

Please submit written comments by U.S. mail to the Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office, 2800 Cottage Way, Room W-2605, Sacramento, CA 95825, Attention: Recovery Division.

Additional information, including the full plan, can be downloaded at www.fws.gov/sacramento.

The Giant Garter Snake Recovery Plan includes new science and analyses on how recovery of the snake can best move forward, and lays out target timelines for recovery and delisting species. Using the best available science, the plan balances the needs of people with the recovery of the species and its required habitat. Once the public and stakeholders have provided input on the draft, the Service will review all comments, develop a cost estimate, finalize the recovery plan and establish an implementation team.

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