

Newly discovered Nevada toad species already under threat

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Nevada's new toad species is already on the brink of extinction.

Conservationists are preparing an emergency petition to have the Dixie Valley toad listed as an endangered [species](#) to protect it from a proposed geothermal energy project at the edge of its isolated home in Churchill County.

Nevada researchers only recently identified the Dixie Valley toad, the first [new species](#) of toad found anywhere in the U.S. in 50 years, the Las Vegas Review-Journal reports (bit.ly/2vbK02S). The new species was discovered by University of Nevada, Reno, researcher Michelle Gordon, former UNR researcher Eric Simandle and UNR Professor C. Richard Tracy, a biologist who has a species of lizard named after him in Argentina.

The unique toad first caught the eye of scientists in the early 2000s, Gordon said. A follow-up study launched in 2014 confirmed its status as a genetically distinct species.

Dixie Valley toads are about 2 inches (5.08 centimeters) long with bumpy skin mottled in green, black and brown. Their only known habitat is a spring-fed marsh covering just more than 2 square miles (5.18 sq. kilometers) of federal land in the remote Dixie Valley, about 400 miles (644 kilometers) northwest of Las Vegas.

The Bureau of Land Management is currently reviewing a plan by Reno-

based Ormat Technologies to build up to two 30-megawatt geothermal power plants directly adjacent to the toad's habitat.

Paul Thomsen, Ormat's executive director for government and regulatory affairs, said in a written statement that his company is "committed to developing its renewable, geothermal facilities in the most environmentally friendly way possible, and we look forward to meeting the requirements put forward by the Bureau of Land Management."

Gordon and others insist the project poses too great a risk to North America's newest toad. During last month's public comment period on the environmental assessment, the Nevada Department of Wildlife questioned Ormat's plans to route the power lines from the new plants through the heart of the wetland.

The environmental assessment, which was written before the new species was confirmed, underestimates the potential threats to the toad and the springs that sustain it, said Patrick Donnelly, Nevada wildlife advocate for the Center for Biological Diversity, a national environmental group.

The agency's stance seems to be "there won't be any impacts, and if there are we will detect them and fix them," Donnelly said, adding that even a small disruption could prove irreversible.

"If those springs went dry for even one year, that would be the extinction of the species," he said.

The Bureau of Land Management is reviewing the comments it received on the [environmental assessment](#) as it prepares to render a decision on the geothermal project.

The stakes couldn't be higher, as far as Gordon is concerned.

"The toad doesn't have any place else to go," she said. "It could be gone before we can find out more about it."

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