

Press Release

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Designates Critical Habitat for the Alabama Sturgeon

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced a final rule designating critical habitat for the Alabama sturgeon, a species listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

The designation for the sturgeon includes one contiguous unit of river channel in portions of the Alabama and Cahaba rivers in the Mobile River Basin, Alabama. The unit encompasses 245 miles of river channel in the Alabama River and 81 miles of river channel in the lower Cahaba River, for a total of 326 miles of river channel.

The final Economic Analysis estimated that the incremental economic impacts of the critical habitat designation to be \$93,800 over the next 20 years. This estimate applies a three percent discount rate. At a seven percent discount rate, the incremental economic impacts of the designation are estimated to be \$71,200 over the next 20 years. Water management accounted for 37.2 percent of incremental economic impacts, discounted at seven percent, followed by water quality at 32.9 percent, other activities at 19.7 percent, and dredging at 10.2 percent. No areas were excluded from the final designation due to economic or other relevant impacts.

When the Alabama sturgeon was first added to the list of threatened and endangered species in 2000, the Service determined that critical habitat was prudent, but not determinable due to lack of information on the species' biological and habitat needs. Shortly after the listing, the Alabama-Tombigbee Rivers Coalition filed suit in federal court alleging several defects in the listing process, including failure to designate critical habitat at the time of listing.

As part of this case, the court ordered the Service to submit a revised prudency determination and, if prudent, a proposed rule designating critical habitat to the *Federal Register* by May 16, 2008, and a final rule by May 16, 2009. The Service reviewed available data on the Alabama sturgeon and two closely related species, the pallid and shovelnose sturgeons. It also considered historical and current habitat conditions where Alabama sturgeons have been collected to identify

specific areas that meet the definition of critical habitat.

Critical habitat is a term used in the Endangered Species Act referring to specific geographic areas with features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management and protection. A critical habitat designation does not establish a preserve or refuge nor does it affect individual citizens, organizations, states, local governments, or other non-federal entities that do not require federal permits or funding. Critical habitat does not include existing developed sites within the proposed unit such as dams, piers, or marinas.

As a listed species under the Endangered Species Act, the Alabama sturgeon is already protected wherever it occurs, and federal agencies are required to consult on any action they take that might affect the species. Designating critical habitat will provide non-regulatory benefits to the sturgeon by informing the public of areas that are important to the species' recovery and identifying where conservation actions would be most effective. The designation of critical habitat also will help the sturgeon by ensuring that federal agencies and the public are aware of the habitat needs of the species.

After this designation of critical habitat, the Service's consultations under the Endangered Species Act with federal agencies, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, are not expected to change substantially. The consultations will require assessment of potential impacts to critical habitat. However, these consultations were already required because of the presence of Alabama sturgeon in the rivers that are being proposed for designation. Recommended flows for the Alabama sturgeon remain the same as the levels the Service consulted on prior to the designation. Therefore, the Service does not anticipate that management of flows within the river will change as a result of the designation.

When determining areas to designate as critical habitat, the Service considers physical and biological habitat features that are essential to the conservation of the species. These features include space for individual and population growth and for normal behavior; cover or shelter; food, water, air, light, minerals, or other nutritional or physiological requirements; sites for breeding and rearing offspring; and habitats that are protected from disturbances or are representative of the historic geographical and ecological distributions of the species.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/> or <http://www.fws.gov/>