

Department of the Interior
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Hawaiian and Pacific Islands Office
<http://pacific.fws.gov>

News Release



For Release: June 10, 2003
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PIEA-03-20
03-058

Moth Critical Habitat Established on Four Hawaiian Islands

Critical habitat for the endangered Blackburn's sphinx moth – Hawaii's largest native insect – was designated today by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on four islands. A total of 55,451 acres in nine units on Maui, Hawaii, Kahoolawe, and Molokai were included. The final designation is approximately 44 percent smaller than the critical habitat proposed for the species in June 2002.

"Twenty years ago, we thought this species was extinct," said Paul Henson, field supervisor for the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific islands fish and wildlife office. "Blackburn's sphinx moths were once found on most of the main Hawaiian Islands, but were probably most common on Maui. They live in coastal or lowland dry forest habitats, which now have been severely degraded by human activities."

Almost 32,000 acres proposed as critical habitat for the species were eliminated in the final rule. This reduction was based on information – provided by the public or gathered during site visits and biological surveys – indicating that the areas do not provide the habitat needed by the species, or are not essential for its conservation. An additional 12,200 acres were excluded because the benefits of doing so outweigh the benefits that would have been provided by the critical habitat designation.

A total of 11,656 acres of private lands on Maui within Ulupalakua Ranch and Haleakala Ranch were excluded because the landowners' ongoing conservation activities on these ranches provide more benefits for the species than would be provided by critical habitat designation.

"Both of these landowners have a long history of working with the Service and others to conserve Hawaii's native species," said Henson. "And both made it clear they may no longer be willing to work with us on these voluntary projects if we designated critical habitat. I have no doubt that in the long run, not only the Blackburn's sphinx moth but also many other native species will benefit by removing these lands from the final rule."

An additional 518 acres in the Kailua-Kona area were excluded because of potential indirect economic and social impacts that outweighed the benefits of critical habitat designation. A master planned community with more than 1,000 units of affordable housing, and an already planned town center for which more than \$20 million already has been expended, could have been affected by the critical habitat designation.

Except for the unit on Molokai, all of the units are occupied by the moth. The Molokai unit was included as the highest quality unoccupied habitat essential to the conservation of the moth – primarily because it appears to lack some of the most serious potential threats to the species, including introduced arthropods such as parasitic wasps. The unit also has populations of the moth’s native host plants, and is in close proximity to an existing population on Maui that could repopulate the historic Molokai habitat.

Of the total acreage designated as critical habitat, 92 percent is owned by the State and 8 percent by private landowners. Six of the critical habitat units are on Maui, mostly along the southern coast. They total almost 23,500 acres. One unit of 4,252 acres is in eastern Kahoolawe, one unit of 2,288 acres is in central Molokai (the Kamoko Flats-Puukolekole area), and one unit of 24,600 acres is on the Big Island in the Puuwaawaa-Hualalai area.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act identifying geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

This critical habitat designation was completed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including habitat conservation plans, safe harbor agreements, candidate conservation agreements, and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service’s private stewardship grants and partners for fish and wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and on state lands administered by the Department of Land and Natural Resources.

An addendum to the draft economic analysis indicates that quantifiable direct costs related to consultation under section 7 of the ESA have been reduced to \$1,183,800 to \$1,739,000 over a period of 10 years. However, the total area and potential impacts evaluated in the addendum include areas excluded in the actual final rule, and costs would be significantly lower.

The Blackburn’s sphinx moth has a wingspan of up to 5 inches. Much of the historical decline of the species is attributed to habitat loss, but introduced ants and parasitic wasps that prey on the moth’s eggs and its caterpillars also are a significant threat. The moth larvae feed on plants in the nightshade family, particularly the native aiea or *Nothocestrum*.

The final critical habitat rule was published in today's *Federal Register*. The final rule and other information about the designation are also available at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Web site at <http://pacificislands.fws.gov>. Copies of the rule may be obtained by calling the Service's Honolulu office at 808/541 3441.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.