

NEWS RELEASE

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May 20, 2014

Contacts: Marelisa Rivera, marelisa\_rivera@fws.gov, 787-851-7297  
Tom MacKenzie, tom\_mackenzie@fws.gov, 404-679-7291

## **U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Seeks Comments on Draft Economic Analysis, Re-opens Comment Period on Proposal to Designate Critical Habitat for Three Caribbean Plants**

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service seeks additional public comment on a proposed critical habitat designation for three plants found in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

All three plants are known by their scientific names, and don't have common names. About 51 acres of critical habitat is proposed for *Agave eggersiana* in St. Croix, U.S. Virgin Islands; 198 acres for *Gonocalyx concolor* in Puerto Rico; and 6,547 acres for *Varronia rupicola* in southern Puerto Rico and Vieques Island. This is the second appeal for public comments on the critical habitat designation.

At the same time, the Service is asking for public comment on a draft economic analysis that considers the cost of the critical habitat designation to Commonwealth, territorial, state, and local governments. This evaluation of economic impacts indicates the proposed critical habitat designation for these three Caribbean plants will not result in a significant economic impact in any given year or result in greater economic impacts to any particular sector. Conservation related efforts and activities will result from the protections afforded to the species through Commonwealth, territory, and federal laws if the species are federally listed.

The draft economic analysis estimates the total incremental cost of critical habitat designation to range from \$400 to \$9,000 (in 2014 dollars) per year. These costs stem from the requirement for federal agencies to consult with the Service regarding the impacts of their actions, or those that they fund or authorize on critical habitat. Most of the costs associated with the proposed designation would be administrative to help determine whether a proposed action would adversely modify the critical habitat area. The economic analysis does not include any costs incurred as a result of the listing.

The deadline for public comment on the draft economic analysis and proposed critical habitat designation is June 20, 2014.

These actions are the result of the Service's proposal in October 22, 2013, to protect these three plants as threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). A final listing decision is pending. *Agave eggersiana* has been a candidate for federal listing since September 22, 2010. *Varronia rupicola* and *Gonocalyx concolor* have been candidates since October 25, 1999. The proposed listing and critical habitat designation for these three plants, as well as and the associated economic analysis, are part of the Service's effort to implement a court-approved

work plan, under a Multi-District Listing Settlement agreement approved in 2011. For more information, please see <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/candidateconservation/>.

These three plants are rare. *Agave eggersiana* is an ornamental and is particularly vulnerable to collection. All three Caribbean plants face some or all of the following threats to their existence: Hurricanes, habitat loss and degradation from development; fires, competition from non-native plants, predation and disease caused by insects, such as weevils, and small and disconnected populations.

Many organizations are working with the Service to conserve these plants, including the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens, the Puerto Rico Conservation Trust, St. George Botanical Garden, the St. Croix Environmental Association, United States Virgin Island Department of Planning and Natural Resources, the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, the National Park Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service and private landowners. For example, the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens developed a germination and cultivation protocol for *Varronia rupicola*, and the National Park Service planted more than 100 juvenile *Agave eggersiana* plants on its lands in St. Croix. Landowners interested in helping the Service conserve the three Caribbean plants, or seeking more information about the potential implications of the listing and critical habitat designation, please contact the Service's Caribbean Ecological Field Office at P.O. Box 491, Boquerón, Puerto Rico 00622, or contact Deputy Field Supervisor Marelisa Rivera at (787) 851-7297, or via e-mail at [marelisa\\_rivera@fws.gov](mailto:marelisa_rivera@fws.gov).

*Agave eggersiana* and *Varronia rupicola* are located on public and private lands. The only known populations of *Gonocalyx concolor* are located within the Carite Commonwealth Forest, managed by the Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It likewise does not grant government or public access to private lands. Although private, local, territorial, and Commonwealth lands are included within the proposed critical habitat for these plants, activities on these lands will not be affected, unless activities on these lands are authorized, funded, or carried out by a federal agency. If federal funds are involved in a project in the area, the government agency involved will need to consult the Service to help landowners avoid, reduce, or mitigate potential impacts to the plants or to ensure actions do not negatively affect these plants.

Written comments concerning the proposed critical habitat designations for these three plants should be submitted by accessing the Federal eRulemaking Portal: <http://www.regulations.gov>. Follow the instructions for submitting comments on Attn: FWS-R4-ES-2013-0040 for the proposed critical habitat designation. You can also visit the websites <http://www.fws.gov/southeast/news/> or <http://www.fws.gov/caribbean/es/>.

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