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News Release



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DRAFT ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF CONSERVATION ACTIONS TO PROTECT THE ENDANGERED LAGUNA MOUNTAINS SKIPPER RELEASED

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released an analysis estimating that costs related to the conservation of the endangered Laguna Mountains skipper butterfly (*Pyrgus ruralis lagunae*) and its proposed critical habitat could range from \$3.7 million to \$5.1 million over the next 20 years.

The difference between the low and high cost estimates results primarily from uncertainty regarding potential impacts to utility companies conducting maintenance activities in areas proposed as critical habitat.

The low-end estimate assumes that costs for maintaining a biologist on site during utility maintenance is limited to one day per project. Under this scenario, 88 percent of estimated costs are associated with welfare losses to campers. Proposed subunits Laguna Meadows and Agua Dulce Campground/Horse Meadow account for about 95 percent of the total impact.

Under the high-end estimate, it is assumed that utility projects will last longer than a single day. Under this scenario, 64 percent of costs are related to lost camping opportunities. Costs to utilities would be approximately 22 percent of the total estimated impact. Laguna Meadows and Agua Dulce proposed subunits are associated with about 83 percent of the total estimated costs.

In 1997, the Service listed the Laguna Mountains skipper butterfly as endangered under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). On December 13, 2005, the Service proposed to designate 6,662 acres of critical habitat for the species in portions of the Palomar and Laguna Mountains in San Diego County, California. Approximately 58 percent of the area proposed as critical habitat is managed by the U.S. Forest Service and about 36 percent is privately owned land.

Areas proposed as critical habitat for the Laguna Mountains skipper contain physical and biological features essential for the conservation of the subspecies' populations, including areas supporting *Horkelia clevelandii* (the butterfly's host plant), nectar sources for adult butterflies, and areas with wet soils or seeps, such as springs or creeks where adults can obtain water and minerals during the flight season.

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the ESA requires the Service to consider economic and other

relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the benefits of including it, the Secretary may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless this would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations or protection. 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. Federal agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection for most listed species, while preventing the agency 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 ESA, 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 the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for listed species is provided on many of the Service's National Wildlife Refuges, and State wildlife management areas.

A copy of the proposed rule, draft economic analysis and other information about the Laguna Mountains skipper is available on the Internet at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>, or by contacting the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office at 760-431-9440.

Release of this draft economic analysis also triggered the reopening of a public comment period. The Service will accept comments and information on the draft economic analysis and proposed critical habitat until August 7, 2006.

Comments and information on the critical habitat and draft economic analysis can be submitted in writing to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92011, or by facsimile to 760-431-9624. Comments may also be sent by electronic mail to FW8pchskipper@fws.gov.

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 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources 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 and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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