

# Facts about *Atriplex coronata* var. *notatior* (San Jacinto Valley crownscale) and Proposed Critical Habitat

## **What is *Atriplex coronata* var. *notatior* (San Jacinto Valley crownscale)?**

An annual plant in the goosefoot family (Chenopodiaceae), San Jacinto Valley crownscale grows 4 to 12 inches tall with grayish colored leaves. The plant generally flowers in April and May.

San Jacinto Valley crownscale is restricted to highly alkaline and silty-clay soils. These soils are found in certain alkali sink scrub, alkali playa, vernal pool, and annual alkali grassland habitats. Habitat for San Jacinto Valley crownscale is typically flooded during winter rains and the plant emerges as waters recede in the spring.

San Jacinto Valley crownscale has a narrow range of distribution and is only known to occur in western Riverside County, California. Within western Riverside County, there are four general population centers of the plant – in the floodplain of the San Jacinto River at the San Jacinto Wildlife Area/Mystic Lake; in the San Jacinto River floodplain between the Ramona Expressway and Railroad Canyon Reservoir; in the Upper Salt Creek Vernal Pool Complex in the west Hemet area; and in the floodplain of Alberhill Creek north of Lake Elsinore.

## **Why is this plant protected under the Endangered Species Act?**

When determining whether a species qualifies for listing under the Endangered Species Act (Act), the Service looks at five separate factors, including: (1) present or threatened destruction, modification, or curtailment of its habitat or range; (2) overutilization for commercial, recreational, scientific, or educational purposes; (3) disease or predation; (4) the inadequacy of existing regulatory mechanisms; and (5) other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence.

San Jacinto Valley crownscale was listed as an endangered species under the Act on Oct. 13, 1998, based on factors 1, 4, and 5. Primary threats to the plant include loss, fragmentation, and alteration of habitat as a result of dry-land farming, urban development, alteration of hydrology (e.g., flood

control projects), and the introduction of non-native, competitive plants.

## **What are the primary habitat requirements for San Jacinto Valley crownscale?**

When designating critical habitat, the Service must determine – based on the best available scientific information – the physical and biological features (primary constituent elements) that are essential to the conservation of a species and which may require special management considerations or protection.

Primary constituent elements are specific habitat components that enable a species to fulfill its life cycle needs. San Jacinto Valley crownscale requires water; space for individual and population growth; and sites for germination and seed dispersal.

More specifically, the primary constituent elements include: (1) seasonal wetland habitats, such as floodplain and vernal pools, and the natural hydrological processes that maintain these habitats; (2) vegetation communities, including alkali playa/scrub/grassland habitats, and lands that may have been or are being used for agriculture but that are located where these vegetation communities historically occurred; and (3) slow-draining alkali soils with a hard pan (impermeable) layer that provides for a perched water table, including the Willows, Domino, Traver, and Chino soil series.

## **What areas have been identified as essential to the conservation of San Jacinto Valley crownscale?**

Based on the location of primary constituent elements and populations of the plant, the Service has identified three units of essential habitat for San Jacinto Valley crownscale, as follows:

Unit 1 – San Jacinto River floodplain at the San Jacinto Wildlife Area/Mystic Lake and between the Ramona Expressway and Railroad Canyon Reservoir. These areas encompass about 12,046 acres and support two population centers of the plant.

Unit 2 – Salt Creek Vernal Pool Complex. This area is west of Hemet and includes about 3,154 acres of privately owned land. One population center of the

plant occurs in this area and also provides the watershed to maintain the ecological function of the vernal pool complex that supports the plant.

Unit 3 – Alberhill Creek floodplain north of Lake Elsinore. About 32 acres are included in this essential habitat unit which supports the fourth known population occurrence of San Jacinto Valley crownscale.

**How do these areas relate to critical habitat?**

Critical habitat is a provision of the Endangered Species of 1973, as amended (Act) that identifies geographic areas within the range of threatened or endangered species that are essential to its conservation, and which may require special management considerations or protection.

The Service has identified approximately 15,232 acres of essential habitat for San Jacinto Valley crownscale.

**Is the Service proposing these lands as critical habitat?**

As a result of a lawsuit filed against the Service by the Center for Biological Diversity and California Native Plant Society, the Service must comply with a court order to determine if critical habitat is prudent for San Jacinto Valley crownscale and, if so, then to publish a proposal on or before October 1, 2004.

All essential habitat for San Jacinto Valley crownscale identified by the Service lies within the boundaries of the Western Riverside Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan. This regional conservation plan was approved by the Service in June 2004.

After reviewing the conservation measures for San Jacinto Valley crownscale under the Plan, the Service has determined it is appropriate to exclude the identified essential habitat for the plant from proposed designation as critical habitat.

Of the 15,232 acres of essential habitat identified for San Jacinto Valley crownscale, 60 acres within the Upper Salt Creek Vernal Pool Complex is preserved and owned by the Riverside County Habitat Conservation Agency. More than 5,400 acres of essential habitat is owned and managed by the California Department of Fish and Game as part of the San Jacinto Wildlife Area.

The Western Riverside Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan commits to the conservation of San Jacinto Valley crownscale and its habitat, including the hydrology necessary to support the plant within the San Jacinto River, Mystic Lake and Salt Creek areas, including the floodplain of the San Jacinto River. Essential habitat in the Alberhill Creek floodplain and essential habitat adjacent to the San Jacinto Wildlife Area are identified as Additional Reserve Lands in the Plan. All known areas where the plant occurs are covered by the Plan.

**Can the public comment on the exclusion of these lands from proposed critical habitat?**

Yes. The Service is actively seeking comments and information from the public and stakeholders about the exclusion of these lands from proposed critical habitat.

If new information is provided that indicates it is inappropriate to exclude these essential habitats from proposed critical habitat, or if additional areas are identified as essential to the conservation of the species, the Service can designate critical habitat, as appropriate.

**How can I comment on the proposed rule?**

Comments on the proposed rule can be submitted in writing to the Field Supervisor, Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office, 6010 Hidden Valley Road, Carlsbad, California 92009. Information and materials may also be sent by facsimile to 760-431-9618.

Comments can also be submitted by electronic mail (e-mail) to [fw1cfwo\\_sjvc@fws.gov](mailto:fw1cfwo_sjvc@fws.gov). If you are sending e-mail comments, please include "Attn: San Jacinto Valley Crownscale" in the subject line of your message and include your name and address in the body of the message.

The Service will accept comments on the proposal until 5:00 p.m. on December 6, 2004. Requests for a public hearing must be submitted in writing within 45 days after the opening of the comment period.

Information about the proposed rule and the plant are available on the Internet at <http://carlsbad.fws.gov>. Copies of the proposed rule can also be requested by calling the Carlsbad Office at 760-431-9440.