



News Release

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NOTE: Photograph and map available upon request.

CRITICAL HABITAT DESIGNATED FOR PECOS SUNFLOWER

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) announced today that 1,305 acres have been designated as critical habitat for the Pecos sunflower, a native plant protected as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). This showy plant survives in fewer than two dozen known locations in desert wetlands of New Mexico and west Texas. The areas designated as critical habitat are located in Chaves, Cibola, and Guadalupe Counties in New Mexico, and Pecos County in Texas.

Critical habitat is a term in the ESA that identifies geographic areas containing features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species, and which may require special management considerations or protection. Designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership, establish a refuge or preserve, and has no impact on private landowners taking actions on their land that do not require federal funding or permits. 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.

When specifying an area as critical habitat, the ESA requires the Service to consider the impact to national security, and economic and other relevant impacts of the designation. If the benefits of excluding an area outweigh the benefits of designating it, the Secretary of the Interior may exclude an area from critical habitat, unless the exclusions would result in the extinction of a threatened or endangered species.

The Pecos sunflower has been protected under the ESA since 1999. A final recovery plan for the plant was completed in 2005. Recovery actions include identifying and securing core conservation habitats essential for the long-term survival of this species, and continuing to study its life history, population, and habitat. The species is present on federal, state, and private lands in New Mexico and Texas. Pursuing voluntary conservation opportunities with landowners is a high priority.

“Landowners can participate in a variety of informal and formal stewardship agreements that will promote conservation of this plant species on their land,” said Benjamin N. Tuggle, Ph.D., Southwest Regional Director for the Service. “The future of this plant can be secured through habitat protection, restoration projects and maintenance of core populations.”

The Service has several partners working toward the recovery of the Pecos sunflower. A large population of Pecos sunflowers was discovered in 2004 at the La Joya State Waterfowl Management Area near Socorro, New Mexico. Also, The Nature Conservancy manages for Pecos sunflowers at its Diamond Y Springs and Sandia Springs Preserves in west Texas, and the State of New Mexico has acquired a significant Pecos sunflower habitat site near Santa Rosa, New Mexico, which is being managed for the conservation of the species.

The Pecos sunflower only grows in saturated soils such as desert wetlands (cienegas), so its habitat is very limited. The species' survival is vulnerable due to aquifer depletions, diversions of surface water, filling wetlands for conversion to dry land, and potential competition with non-native invasive plants. Seed dispersal is also restricted by the distance from one wetland to another.

Recent advances in technology and their effective use in conservation planning and implementation have led the Service to a strategic assessment of sustainable landscapes. Strategic Habitat Conservation is a tool to guide the Service's conservation work with more integrated information and cross-program collaboration to strengthen the results. It is a blending of science and relationships to meet the Service's conservation priorities, such as this effort to identify important habitat areas that may contribute to the recovery of the Pecos sunflower.

Copies of the final critical habitat rule, economic and environmental analyses, and the Finding of No Significant Impact can be obtained at <http://www.fws.gov/southwest/es/NewMexico/> or by contacting the New Mexico Ecological Services Field Office, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2105 Osuna NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico 87113, or by calling 800-299-0196.

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. We are both a leader and trusted partner in fish and wildlife conservation, known for our scientific excellence, stewardship of lands and natural resources, dedicated professionals and commitment to public service. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov.

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