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News Release



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Service Proposes Designation of Critical Habitat for Western Yellow-Billed Cuckoo

Agency Seeks Public Comments by October 14, 2014

Sacramento – The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to designate 546,335 acres of critical habitat for the western distinct population segment of the yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) in 80 separate units in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah and Wyoming. The bird is a neotropical migrant that winters in South America and nests along rivers and streams in western North America.

“The designation of critical habitat is an important step in recovering the western yellow-billed cuckoo,” said Jennifer Norris, Field Supervisor for the Service’s Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office. “Critical habitat identifies areas with essential nesting and fledgling sites where conservation actions are needed to protect and recover this imperiled songbird.”

In the proposal, the Service is considering excluding approximately 193,347 acres from the critical habitat designation because of existing conservation plans for those areas that already protect the western yellow-billed cuckoo and its habitat. Of the 245,000 acres of critical habitat proposed in Arizona, 149,067 acres are being considered for exclusion in 20 of the 39 Critical Habitat Units in the state. All proposed critical habitat designations on tribal lands are being considered for exclusion.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act (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 or 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.

Most western yellow-billed cuckoos are currently found in Arizona, New Mexico, and the Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa. The U.S. state with the greatest number of western yellow-billed cuckoos is Arizona. Suitable cuckoo habitat in Arizona varies and can be a mix of one or more broadleaf riparian tree species, primarily cottonwood and willow. Mesquite associated with riparian habitat is a common component of western

yellow-billed cuckoo habitat in the state. Habitat may also include sycamore, alder, boxelder, walnut, elderberry, hackberry, desert willow, oak, and tamarisk. Western yellow-billed cuckoos have been found using habitat that varies from narrow to wide floodplains; drainages with perennial to intermittent flow; native-dominated to mixed native/non-native habitat; and cottonwood-willow riparian gallery forest to narrow stringers of more upland tree species.

Substantial overlap exists between habitat currently designated as critical habitat for southwestern willow flycatchers and the habitat proposed for designation as critical habitat for the western yellow-billed cuckoo. Of the 80 critical habitat units proposed for the western yellow-billed cuckoo, portions or all of 43 of these units are already designated as critical habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher. These 43 units total 372,310 acres or 66 percent of the acres of proposed critical habitat.

On October 3, 2013, the Service proposed to list the western DPS of the yellow-billed cuckoo as a threatened species under the ESA in the western United States, Canada and Mexico. The listing proposal, which is based on the best scientific data available, cites threats from loss of riparian habitat and habitat fragmentation as a result of conversion of land to agriculture, dams and river flow management, bank protection, overgrazing and exotic plants as key factors in the decline of the western yellow-billed cuckoo. Habitat loss in the Southwest is primarily due to human caused alteration of the hydrology.

The Service is seeking information concerning the western yellow-billed cuckoo's biology and habitat, threats to the species and current efforts to protect the bird. The Service also seeks information on the incremental economic effects of the proposed critical habitat designation. To access the proposed rules and a specific outline of information requested by the Service, please go to our webpage at:

http://www.fws.gov/sacramento/outreach/Public-Advisories/WesternYellow-BilledCuckoo/outreach_PA_Western-Yellow-Billed-Cuckoo.htm.

Comments on the proposed critical habitat rule will be accepted through October 14, 2014. Comments may be submitted online at the Federal eRulemaking Portal at <http://www.regulations.gov>. The docket number for the proposed rule is FWS-R8-ES-2013-0011. Comments can also be sent by U.S. Mail or Hand Delivery: Public Comments Processing, Attn: FWS-ES-R8-2013-0011; Division of Policy and Directives Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Headquarters, MS: BPHC, 5275 Leesburg Pike, Falls Church, VA 22041-3803.

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