



Withdrawal of the Proposal to Delist the Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle (VELB)

Questions and Answers



The VELB is a medium-sized beetle that is one-half to one-inch long with arching long antennae. Adult males have red wings with four dark spots. The VELB is a wood borer found only in California's Central Valley and depends solely on elderberry shrubs for food and shelter.

The VELB was listed as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1980 due to inadequate regulatory protection and loss of its habitat from agricultural and urban development largely attributed to flood control activities. At the time of listing, the VELB was known from only 10 occurrences at three locations along the American River, Putah Creek and the Merced River. Nearly 90 percent of the Central Valley's riparian vegetation, including elderberry shrubs, has been lost.

What is this action?

The Service is withdrawing a 2012 proposal to remove ESA protections for the VELB. This means that the VELB remains a threatened species on the Endangered Species List. It is still a violation of the ESA to kill, harm or harass (take) VELB without a permit.

Why is the Service withdrawing the proposal?

The Service originally published the proposal to delist the VELB on Oct. 2, 2012, and opened a 60-day public comment period. At that time, the available information indicated delisting the VELB was warranted. The Service opened another 30-day comment period on Jan. 23, 2013, to ensure an independent peer review panel could complete review and make their findings publicly available.

Based on comments received from peer reviewers and information received during the open comment periods, the Service re-analyzed the available data on the VELB and revised the description of the VELB's life history and known distribution and occupancy. The range of the VELB is now considered to be smaller than what was described in the proposed delisting rule.

In light of this re-analysis and the ongoing threats to the VELB, the Service has found that the scientific data do not support delisting at this time.

What specifically changed?

The Service formerly looked at all occurrence records described for the VELB, many of which are more than 20 years old and based on observations of exit holes in elderberry shrubs that are of questionable quality or misidentified exit holes in elderberry shrubs. Now, we understand that exit holes on elderberry shrubs do not verify the existence of VELB because exit holes can also be made by the California elderberry longhorn beetle. With this uncertainty, the Service reevaluated occurrence records and developed a revised presumed historic range.

The Service also found there is limited current population abundance and distribution information to determine population trends or currently occupied habitat.

Threats to the VELB such as climate change, predators, pesticides and invasive species are ongoing, have not been ameliorated as previously thought, and occur throughout the range of the species.

Who may be affected by this action?

Federal agencies, under the ESA, are still required to consult with the Service to ensure any action they authorize, fund or carry out is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the VELB.

The Service will continue to work with managers and operators of non-federal projects to ensure projects that have the potential to impact the VELB can move forward while providing for the conservation of the species.

Projects that might adversely affect the species will continue to require ESA compliance through either Section 7 consultations (if a federal project) or the Section 10 Habitat Conservation Planning (HCP) process (if non-federal). Existing consultations, permitted HCPs and agreements made on behalf of the species remain in effect.

With new insight regarding the beetle's presumed historic range, the Service is working on new internal guidance for streamlined consultation within the core range of the species and guidance on site-specific approaches for areas that overlap with the California elderberry longhorn beetle or where occurrences may be rare or sparsely distributed.

Kings, Kern, and Tulare counties will no longer be considered within the range of the species, and projects in those counties will not need to consult with the Service for VELB conservation.

What happens to in-progress ESA section 7 consultations for project no longer located in the revised range of the VELB?

Consultations will continue to follow the existing conservation guidelines until new guidelines are established. At that time, if projects fall outside areas where VELB are known to exist, all consultation requirements under the ESA will be lifted.

Any VELB, regardless of its defined range or where it is found, is protected by the ESA.

What is the background of this action?

At the time of listing in 1980, the VELB was known from fewer than 10 occurrence records (sightings) at three locations in Merced, Sacramento, Yolo and Solano counties. We determined that the loss of habitat through agricultural conversion, levee construction and stream channelization had reduced the species to a few remnant populations.

Subsequent surveys indicated that the known range of the beetle included portions of 26 locations of riparian vegetation and upland beetle habitat in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys, from Shasta County to Kern County. At the time of the proposed rule to delist the species, data seemed to indicate that there were approximately 201 beetle occurrence records at 26 locations indicating a larger range than estimated at the time of listing.

The Service published a proposal to delist the VELB in 2012 in light of these data, efforts to restore VELB habitat, and indications the VELB was persisting in additional parts of its historical range with areas of known occupancy somewhat more widespread than at the time of listing.

In the comment periods that followed the proposed delisting rule, the Service considered new information and an independent peer review report that prompted the Service to reexamine existing data. As a result, the Service updated its scientific understanding of the VELB and determined that the best available information did not support delisting the VELB.

In light of this, the Service has withdrawn the proposal to delist the VELB.

What are the ongoing threats to the VELB?

The VELB's restricted habitat, dependence on riparian ecosystems, and locally clustered populations with limited dispersal ability limit the VELB's distribution and population growth. These vulnerabilities may separately or together increase the risk of other threats facing the VELB:

Levee vegetation management actions – New flood management projects and maintenance of existing projects may result in losses of riparian vegetation and elderberry shrubs in addition to what has been historically lost. This threat may be reduced in the future in some locations within the Central Valley, at least in the short term, with implementation of California Department of Water Resource's levee vegetation management strategy.

Predation – The Argentine ant is believed to be a predator of VELB, and this threat is likely to increase in the Central Valley as colonies further expand into the VELB's range.

Climate Change – Increased temperatures and changes to hydrologic conditions are expected to affect riparian systems and other habitats that VELB need to survive. These challenges will be compounded by drought events and water supply needs for urban and agricultural uses in the Central Valley. Long-term climate change effects will continue to have an overall negative effect on the available habitat throughout the revised range of the VELB.

These threats are compounded by the beetle's sole reliance on elderberry shrubs in riparian habitat that has been fragmented and reduced in size.

Are there programs working toward VELB habitat conservation and restoration?

Yes. Restoration and mitigation efforts have created additional elderberry habitat in the Central Valley, and two regional conservation plans that include the valley elderberry longhorn beetle as a covered species have been completed within its range.

The largest effort to protect and restore VELB habitat, mainly through the planting of elderberry shrubs, is at the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge was established in 1989, in part to restore floodplain habitats and riparian vegetation including elderberries specifically for VELB recovery efforts. Since then, the Service and partners have planted more than 100,000 elderberries along the Sacramento River.

These efforts are important for the conservation of the species, however, comprehensive surveys for the presence of the VELB in conservation areas have not been conducted, and the success of these sites in establishing suitable elderberry habitat for the beetle has not been adequately evaluated.

Does this action affect current access to water?

No. With this action, the VELB will remain a threatened species under the ESA. Water users in the range of the VELB will see no changes in how the regulatory process currently works.

What are the next steps?

The Service will continue to work with others to protect and recover the VELB under the ESA.

The Service is working on new internal guidance for consultation within the range of the species for projects (such as those associated with flood control), and guidance on site-specific approaches for areas that overlap with the California elderberry longhorn beetle or where occurrences may be rare or sparsely distributed.

To better understand the VELB, the Service is engaged in ongoing conservation and monitoring efforts. The Service has issued research permits to scientists to study and learn more about the VELB and its habitat. The Service is supporting additional studies to better understand where the VELB exists.

In three years, the Service expects this research to provide tangible information about the VELB's current population abundance and distribution. If new information leads us to again conclude that VELB does not warrant listing, we would again propose to delist.

MORE QUESTIONS?

Please write or call:

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office
2800 Cottage Way, W-2605

If you use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD), call the Federal Information Relay Service (FIRS) at (800) 877-8339.

Sacramento, California 95825
Telephone (916) 414-6600
Facsimile (916) 414-6712