

Q&A: Critical Habit Proposed For Two South Florida Cacti

Q: Why is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service seeking to designate critical habitat for these two species of cacti?

A: Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), when we determine that any species is threatened or endangered, we must designate critical habitat “to the maximum extent prudent and determinable” (section 4(a)(3)(A)). Initially, we found critical habitat to be “not prudent” in the proposed rule to list Florida semaphore cactus and aboriginal prickly-apple as endangered species because of the potential for an increase in poaching. However, we re-evaluated the prudency determination for both cacti based on public comment and information already available in the public domain that indicates where these species are found. Consequently, we have determined that critical habitat is prudent and determinable for both species.

Q: What were previous federal actions regarding these two species of cacti?

A: Previous federal actions are outlined in our proposed and final rules to list both species as endangered species under the ESA published in the Federal Register on October 11, 2012 (77 FR 61836) and October 24, 2013 (78 FR 63796), respectively.

Q: What are the biggest threats to these two cacti?

A: Wild populations of Florida semaphore cactus no longer occur on half of the islands in the Florida Keys where they historically occurred. Threats of poaching and vandalism, predation by a nonnative moth, disease, competition from nonnative, invasive plant species and wildfire, and habitat loss still exist in the remaining populations. Additionally, low genetic diversity and lack of sexual reproduction are threats to Florida semaphore cactus.

Aboriginal prickly-apple no longer occurs in the northern extent of its range in Manatee County, and threats of poaching, competition from nonnative, invasive plant species, wildfire, disease, predation, vandalism and habitat loss still exist in the remaining populations.

For both of these cacti, the fact that there are only a few small populations of each, and the remoteness of occupied habitat makes enforcement difficult, collection has and continues to be a significant threat to both of these species. Because populations are isolated and these species have a limited ability to recolonize historically occupied habitats, they are vulnerable to natural or human-caused changes in their habitat.

Q: What areas are proposed for critical habitat designation for these two cacti?

A: We are proposing four units as critical habitat for Florida semaphore cactus in Miami-Dade and Monroe Counties. Eleven units are being proposed as critical habitat for aboriginal prickly-apple in Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte and Lee Counties.

The four units proposed for the Florida semaphore cactus are:(1) FSC1 Swan Key in Biscayne National Park, Miami-Dade County; (2) FSC2 Key Largo, Monroe County; (3) FSC3 Big Pine Key, Monroe County; and (4) FSC4 Little Torch Key in Monroe County. Land ownership within the proposed critical habitat area consists of federal (28 percent), state (58 percent), county (1 percent), and private and other (14 percent).

The eleven units proposed for the aboriginal prickly-apple are: (1) Unit APA1 Terra Ceia, Manatee County, Florida; (2) Unit APA2 Longboat Key, Sarasota County; (3) Unit APA3 Osprey, Sarasota County; (4) Unit APA4 Manasota Key, Sarasota and Charlotte Counties; (5) Unit APA5 Charlotte Harbor, Charlotte County; (6) Unit APA6 Gasparilla Island North, Charlotte and Lee Counties; (7) Unit APA7 Gasparilla Island South, Lee County; (8) Unit APA8 Cayo Pelau, Charlotte and Lee Counties; (9) Unit APA9 Cayo Costa, Lee County; (10) Unit APA10 Bocilla Island, Lee County; and (11) Unit APA11 Sanibel Island and Buck Key, Lee County. Land ownership within the proposed critical habitat consists of Federal (11 percent), State (48 percent), County (15 percent), and private and other (26 percent).

Q: How were these areas chosen?

A: Biologists considered physical or biological features needed for life processes and successful reproduction of the species. These include:

- space for individual and population growth and for normal behavior;
- cover or shelter;
- food, water, air, light, minerals, or other nutritional or physiological requirements;
- sites for breeding and rearing offspring; and,
- habitats that are protected from disturbances or are representative of the historical geographical and ecological distributions of a species.

Q: Why is the Service proposing to designate two critical habitat areas for the aboriginal prickly-apple that are unoccupied by the plant?

A: The current distribution of the aboriginal prickly-apple is reduced from its historical distribution, with no populations remaining in Manatee County, at the northern extent of the plant's range. Although the prickly-apple is not currently found in Terra Ceia in Manatee County or in Cayo Costa in Lee County, Florida, both areas still have habitat suitable for reintroduction and expansion of the plant's populations. Both areas feature large, connecting habitat parcels that where additional populations could expand or be reintroduced to help the prickly-apple survive threats such as hurricanes, storms, succession, habitat disturbance, and sea level rise. A total of 66 acres of Terra Ceia is owned by the State of Florida, 70 acres are owned by the County, and 87 acres are

privately-owned. A total of 1,379 acres of Cayo Costa are owned by the state, 94 acres by the county, and 230 acres are privately-owned.

Q: How is critical habitat defined?

A: Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies geographic areas containing features essential to the conservation of a listed species and which may require special management considerations or protection. Specifying the location of habitat essential to the conservation of the species helps federal agencies identify where to utilize their authorities to benefit listed species. The designation also helps focus the conservation efforts of other conservation partners, such as state and local governments, non-governmental organizations and individuals.

However, a critical habitat designation does not signal that habitat outside the designated area is unimportant or may not support recovery of the species. Federal agencies will continue to consult with the Service on any action they conduct, fund and/or permit that might affect the species regardless of whether the action occurs within designated critical habitat or not.

When critical habitat is designated, this responsibility broadens to include consideration of any destruction or adverse modification to critical habitat that could result from the proposed federal action. Designating critical habitat also provides non-regulatory benefits by informing the public of areas that are important to the species' recovery and identifying where conservation actions would be most effective.

Q: What does the economic analysis mean to private landowners in the area?

It is unlikely private landowners will incur costs associated with this critical habitat designation. Only activities authorized, funded or carried out by a federal agency and are likely to destroy or adversely modify the area of critical habitat are affected. Most of the cost measures factored into the economic analysis relate to the increase in administrative costs to federal agencies, and only apply when consultations are anticipated for projects that may appreciably diminish the conservation value of habitat conditions essential for the species conservation.